



Briefing Note

Published 15 February 2021

**Crisis Group Libya Update #4**

*This Briefing Note assesses the outcome of a UN-backed forum that took place in Geneva from 1-5 February and where Libyan delegates elected a new interim executive. It is the fourth in a series of regular updates on efforts to end Libya's civil war.*

## Against All Odds, Libya's Peace Process Makes Substantial Progress

**O**n 5 February, Libyan delegates attending UN-hosted political talks in Geneva nominated a new unified interim executive for their country, which has been split in two regions, each administered separately, since 2014. They chose eastern Libya's Mohamed Mnefi to head a new three-person Presidency Council and a businessman from Misrata in western Libya, Abdulhamid Dabaiba, as prime minister-designate. If confirmed, this executive would serve until elections in late 2021. The Mnefi-Dabaiba list won by a slim majority in a race with other heavyweights including the eastern parliament's speaker, Aghela Saleh, and the Tripoli government's interior minister, Fathi Bashaga. It was a significant accomplishment that during the marathon five-day proceedings, which were broadcast live on the internet and Libyan television, no controversy arose. The losing candidates conceded defeat. This outcome sets the right tone for returning to peaceful, healthy political competition in Libya after years of bellicose rhetoric and a fifteen-month war that ended in June 2020. To translate this preliminary result into a concrete step toward unifying a country, the nominees and the cabinet they propose must now pass a vote of confidence in the House of Representatives.

It will not be easy. One challenge is to bring together the House's members, who are split

into one group based in Tobruk, eastern Libya, and another in the capital Tripoli. Another is for Dabaiba to propose a cabinet line-up that satisfies all constituencies. Negotiations are under way, but it will be taxing for the prime minister-designate to meet all the factions' demands even if he proceeds with the bloated cabinet of 30 ministers that he appears to be considering.

That said, parliamentary approval of the new cabinet is not impossible. The political atmosphere in Libya has improved significantly since 2015, when a similar attempt to win parliamentary backing for a UN-backed transitional authority failed. While at that time the main actors' attitudes were confrontational, today both camps have adopted a more conciliatory tone.

### **An Unexpected Outcome**

When, in November 2020, the UN launched the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, few expected it to reach agreement on a new interim government. It seemed destined for discord, as it comprised 74 delegates sent by the two rival assemblies in addition to several UN-handpicked independents representing a broad spectrum of the country's military, political and tribal factions. At first, progress was indeed stumbling. The forum laid out a roadmap to elections, but its members were deadlocked for over two months on how to select top state



A UN official shows the ballot box to participants of the UN-hosted Libyan Political Dialogue Forum in Geneva, 5 February 2021.

officials. Delegates and UN officials assumed that the forum would agree on a new executive by consensus (*ijma*), as members had done with the roadmap. This approach would have been in line with other UN-mediated peace talks, in which rival factions negotiate arrangements that are acceptable to all, but it would likely have been arduous and time-consuming.

Instead, the forum opted for something entirely different. To select the new executive, [delegates agreed in late January](#) to hold an election with two possible voting procedures: the first vote on prospective nominees was to take place on a regional (geographic) basis, and, if that failed (in the eventuality that none of the candidates reached the required 60 per cent endorsement), voting would then take place between joint tickets specifying the candidates for the prime minister's slot and three Presidency Council positions. These officials would jointly lead the country until general elections that have been scheduled for late 2021. Any Libyan who received endorsements from at least two forum members by a 28 January

deadline could run for these positions. From 1-5 February, over 40 candidates presented themselves through video link to the forum members in Geneva. Libyans at home could also follow the proceedings, which were broadcast live. Although some Libyans outside the forum questioned the legitimacy of the UN-backed process, high-level politicians from across the spectrum and spanning the civil war's divide endorsed it *de facto* by joining the race.

Following a nail-biting four-day voting session, an unexpected result emerged. The region-based vote did not produce a winner, so voting followed the joint ticket system. Of four groups of candidates running in the joint ticket vote, delegates narrowed the lists down to two after a first round of voting. The forum then picked a winning slate on 5 February with 39 votes of 74. It comprised Dabaiba, a businessman with ties to the former Qadhafi regime, as prime minister-designate and Mnefi, from the east and a former Libyan ambassador to Greece, Musa Koni from the south and Abdullah al-Lafi from the west as Presidency Council

*“In a great and unexpected display of political sportsmanship, all the losing candidates conceded defeat and congratulated the winners.”*

members. By virtue of an implicit understanding that, if the prime minister is from western Libya – Dabaiba is from Misrata in the west – an easterner should head the Presidency Council, Mnefi is due to become the Council’s president.

The result was a blow to supporters of the list defeated in the run-off, which included Bashaga and Saleh, who had formed an alliance of convenience that some foreign officials, especially in Paris and Cairo, had expected and may have quietly hoped to win. Dabaiba’s victory was not so much an endorsement of his list (many Libyans are wary of his family name, which they associate with Qadhafi-era corruption) as a rejection of Bashaga and Saleh. Many delegates and their constituents were annoyed by the pair’s evident confidence of prevailing. But they also had substantive concerns: Bashaga’s anti-militia agenda engendered the opposition of powerful armed groups and politicians in Tripoli, who also rejected Saleh’s support for Haftar’s war in Tripoli. Haftar, for his part, considered Saleh, his nominal ally, unreliable.

### **Cautiously Positive Reactions to the New Interim Executive**

In a great and unexpected display of political sportsmanship, all the losing candidates [conceded](#) defeat and congratulated the winners. Faiez Serraj, the current head of the Tripoli-based Presidency Council, also [welcomed](#) the result. These reactions are remarkable given the rancour and zero-sum mentality that often prevail in the Libyan political arena. Also surprising is the absence of controversies, such as allegations of vote buying, surrounding the election. Such accusations surfaced two months ago, but thus far no one has come forward to substantiate them. These signs would seem to indicate that no one is working actively to spoil the Mnefi-Dabaiba team’s prospects.

Another unforeseen development is that Haftar and his forces, which backed another set of candidates who lost in an earlier stage of the race, embraced the winning ticket. On 6 February, Haftar’s spokesperson [stated](#) that his group is ready to work with the elected leaders; in a subsequent [televised interview](#), he went so far as to claim that his side accepted that the new Presidency Council would also act as the supreme commander of the armed forces. This statement is nothing short of a U-turn: earlier, Haftar had flatly rejected the idea that the armed forces could come under the oversight of a body not directly elected by the Libyan people. The Haftar camp’s reversal is all the more surprising given that it has no obvious ally in the nominated line-up. Mnefi, the would-be eastern representative in the Presidency Council, is close to Tripoli-based politicians who defended the capital from Haftar’s military assault. Nonetheless, the field marshal gave Mnefi the red-carpet treatment when he travelled to Benghazi on 11 February. Mnefi is scheduled to tour the rest of eastern Libya in the coming days.

Politicians aligned with the Tripoli-based authorities have not generally enjoyed a warm welcome in the east. But Mnefi could be an exception as he hails from the tribe of Libyan anti-colonial hero Omar al-Mukhtar. Dabaiba, for his part, has a broad network of business associates across the country, including in the east, and many consider him a pragmatist with whom one can strike deals.

For now, the Mnefi-Dabaiba ticket appears to have the tacit support of important actors in western Libya, including armed groups in Tripoli that were relieved to see their fiercest adversary, Bashaga, lose the race. Yet should Dabaiba or Mnefi appear to be cosyng up or conceding too much to Haftar, some anti-Haftar personalities who have supported them so far could be pushed to change their positions.

International reactions have also been positive. An array of countries, including the U.S., the UK, Italy, France and Germany, who issued a [joint statement](#), as well as the [United Arab Emirates](#), Turkey and Egypt, expressed support for the UN process and the newly nominated leadership team. [Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan](#) and [Egypt's President Abdel-fattah al-Sisi](#) made calls to the prime minister-designate, while French President [Emmanuel Macron](#) and Russian Foreign Minister [Sergey Lavrov](#) telephoned both Dabaiba and Mnefi. Diplomats express confidence that these gestures are not merely the usual courtesies. For its part, the UN Security Council issued a [presidential statement](#) welcoming the interim executive's nomination as "an important milestone in the Libyan political process".

### **Broader Dynamics Build Momentum**

The progress toward Libya's political reunification has not happened in a vacuum. Several factors played a role in the breakthrough. Libyans across the country have grown increasingly frustrated with their leaders for failing to deliver basic services over the past few years. Living conditions have deteriorated steadily. Even though Libya's political elites have a track record of resisting change, they have become conscious of the risk of backlash should they cleave to business as usual.

Another factor is the military stalemate that followed the assault on Tripoli. The defeat of Haftar-led forces in their attempt to seize the capital, marked by their withdrawal from its outskirts in June 2020, dealt a blow to their ambitions to impose their own Libyan government by force. Similarly, stakeholders in western Libya have become increasingly conscious that it would be hard for them to seize Haftar's eastern strongholds by force without triggering an even greater conflagration fuelled by foreign sponsors of both sides. In addition, many Libyans have become weary of external interference in their affairs, particularly the presence of foreign forces, whether the Turkish officers and Syrian proxies openly supporting Tripoli or the Russian private security contractors covertly on

Haftar's side. A sense of urgency about cutting ties with foreign sponsors became palpable during the UN-backed negotiations between representatives of Libya's two military coalitions that have been taking place since October. All these interests converged within the political class to push forward the negotiations over a new executive.

Another important element that is making the leadership team more palatable, at least in some easterners' eyes, is the progress in addressing financial disputes that have tarnished relations between Tripoli and its eastern rivals for years. In early February, the Tripoli government agreed to shoulder all the expenditures of the parallel authorities in the east, including the Haftar-led forces' salaries and operating costs, and to incorporate these outlays into the 2021 national budget. In exchange, the east-based government committed to stop resorting to parallel revenue sources, such as treasury bills, which they have been using since 2015. Moreover, also in early February, the Central Bank of Libya agreed to offer a zero-interest credit line to a group of banks, for the most part based in eastern Libya. The region has been badly affected by a [financial crisis](#) triggered when the central bank, along with the country's other institutions, split in 2014.

Financial considerations could also factor into pro-Tripoli constituencies' acceptance of the new executive. Authorities in western Libya know that only a unified government will enable oil revenues – the country's main source of income, now sequestered in an account managed by the National Oil Corporation – to revert to the state.

### **What Next?**

For the time being, Dabaiba and Mnefi are only prime minister-designate and Council president-designate, respectively. They are not yet de facto heads of government, even though outside accounts, including the UN Security Council presidential statement, which referred to them incorrectly as the "new interim authority", commonly misrepresent them as such. Parliamentary approval and a formal transfer

of power still need to take place. According to the UN-backed roadmap, Dabaiba has until 26 February to present a cabinet line-up to the House of Representatives. From that moment, the latter has 21 days to approve or reject the government. In case of rejection, the 74 forum members could in theory decide to ratify the government unilaterally, a fallback option designed for the eventuality that the House, divided since 2014, proves unable or unwilling to meet or reach the minimum threshold needed for a confidence vote.

Full and proper parliamentary approval is important, however, at the current juncture. Without it, the east-based authorities would probably keep operating as a parallel government, while the new interim Government of National Unity, as Dabaiba proposes to call his executive, would lack the legal basis to work. The problem is that House members split into two factions in 2014, one based in Tobruk, where the House formally took its seat, and another in Tripoli. On the surface, dynamics between these two groups still appear confrontational, with one faction calling for the confidence vote to take place in Tobruk and the other demanding that it proceed somewhere in western Libya. A middle-ground position has started to emerge, however. In a 10 February [statement](#), the two deputy House speakers, Fawzi Nuweri and Hamid Huma, called for a plenary session to take place in any city

to which a UN-backed commission representing Libya's two rival military coalitions would agree. Sirte, the city in central Libya where the military commission has its headquarters, would be a natural choice. The issue remains unresolved for now.

House members should capitalise on developments to hold a vote on the proposed executive and cabinet when the latter is ready. The UN should actively support such efforts. As Nuweri and Huma wrote in their statement: "Let's begin a new phase that closes the chapter of the past and proceed toward a better future". A symbolic meeting in Sirte, where a conference hall for this purpose is available, would indeed be a welcome step. But it would require the joint military commission to guarantee all parliamentarians' safety and to secure access to the city's airport, which has been off limits, including to the commission itself, allegedly because Russian private security contractors and fighter jets are there. The UN could offer to facilitate such a session and help ensure that flights are authorised to land in Sirte, should parliamentarians make such a request.

The situation remains fragile; all the welcome progress thus far could still be reversed. For the good of the country, Libyan and foreign stakeholders need to build on the forum's accomplishments and resist the temptation to revert to spoiling tactics based on their long-standing zero-sum calculus.

*“The situation remains fragile; all the welcome progress thus far could still be reversed.”*