

Will Libya Ever Be Whole Again?

Prospects for Unity and Stability in a Fragmented State

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Abstract

Libya's post-Gaddafi fracture into rival eastern and western power centers presents a critical test case for American statecraft in managing regional instability. This article examines whether Libya's reunification remains achievable amid entrenched political divisions, competing foreign interventions, and militia fragmentation. Analysis reveals that external actors—Russia, Turkey, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates—have sustained Libya's partition through proxy support, transforming the conflict into a broader great-power contest with implications for Mediterranean security and energy markets. Despite failed UN mediation efforts and the expiration of interim governing arrangements, pathways to unity exist through grassroots pressure, shifting regional alignments, and institutional bridging mechanisms. The article advocates a comprehensive US strategy employing diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments to forge a power-sharing arrangement and credible electoral process. Without assertive US leadership coordinating international efforts and pressuring spoilers, Libya risks permanent partition or renewed civil war—outcomes that threaten counterterrorism gains, enable Russian entrenchment, and destabilize North Africa.

Nearly 15 years after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, Libya remains less a nation than a negotiated truce among rival power centers. What began in 2011 as an Arab Spring revolt against dictatorship metastasized into a prolonged civil conflict that shattered central authority and fractured the state into competing political and military enclaves. The collapse of the regime removed a tyrant, but it also removed the only structure capable of holding Libya together.

Today, Libya exists in a condition of suspended disintegration. An internationally recognized government governs in the west from Tripoli, while a parallel authority backed by the Libyan National Army dominates the east. Neither camp possesses the legitimacy, cohesion, or coercive power required to reunify the country. Yet each retains sufficient military and financial leverage to veto any political settlement that threatens its position. The result is a durable stalemate—too weak for unity, too strong for peace.

For Libyans, this limbo has meant endemic insecurity, predatory governance, and the steady erosion of public trust in national institutions. For foreign policymakers, Libya presents a more consequential dilemma: whether a strategically located, resource-rich state on NATO's southern flank can still be reconstructed

as a sovereign whole—or whether fragmentation has hardened into permanence. At stake is not only Libya’s future, but the stability of the central Mediterranean, North Africa, and the broader competition for influence in the Middle East and Africa. The question is no longer how Libya fell apart. It is whether the forces pulling it together can ever outweigh those keeping it divided.

A Decade of Fragmentation in Post-Revolution Libya

Libya’s post-revolutionary order is defined by two men who embody its paralysis. Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, ensconced in Tripoli, and Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, dominant in the east, stand atop rival systems of power that mirror the country’s geographic and political divide. Neither commands the authority to reunify Libya. Both, however, possess sufficient military force and financial leverage to block any settlement that threatens their position. Libya is thus trapped in a condition of mutual obstruction rather than national governance.¹

The roots of this fragmentation lie in the disorder that followed Muammar Gaddafi’s overthrow. The collapse of the regime in 2011 created a vacuum that no successor authority was prepared to fill.² Transitional institutions proved incapable of disarming or subordinating the revolutionary militias that proliferated across the country. By 2014, contested elections produced two rival legislatures—one in Tripoli, the other in Tobruk—triggering Libya’s first post-revolution civil war and formalizing an east–west split along ideological, tribal, and geographic lines.³

International efforts to paper over this divide produced only partial fixes. The 2015 UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement created a Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, but it never extended effective authority beyond western Libya.⁴ In the east, Haftar and the House of Representatives rejected subordination to Tripoli and instead constructed a parallel order centered on the Libyan National Army and a rival administrative apparatus in Cyrenaica.⁵ Libya thus acquired not one weak state, but two competing ones.

¹ Karim Mezran, “The end of Libya’s false stability period,” *MENASource* (blog), 20 September 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>; and Jamal Jawhar, “From Haftar to Dbeibah: The Map of Control and Influence in Libya,” *Asbarg Al-Awsat*, 5 June 2025, <https://english.aawsat.com/>.

² Walid Ali, “How security shaped Libya’s transition,” *Democratization* 32, no. 4 (2025): 993–1015, <https://doi.org/>; and Hafeed Al-Ghwell, “Libya: How to govern around fragmentation,” *Arab News*, 9 August 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/>.

³ Federica Saini Fasanotti, “Libya is caught in an ever-deepening vicious circle,” Geopolitical Intelligence Services, 24 March 2025, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/>.

⁴ Imad K. Harb, “The Still Elusive Libyan Peace,” *Arab Center*, 17 August 2017, <https://arabcenterdc.org/>.

⁵ Luis Aleman and Karim Mezran, “Libya’s stalled transition: When domestic spoilers meet foreign interests,” *MENASource*, 18 September 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

This fragile equilibrium collapsed in 2019 when Haftar launched a military campaign to seize Tripoli. Backed by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Russian mercenaries, his forces swept across southern Libya and advanced to the capital's outskirts. The offensive failed not because of internal reconciliation, but because of foreign counter-intervention.⁶ Turkey entered the conflict decisively on behalf of the Tripoli authorities, deploying drones, advisors, and Syrian auxiliaries that reversed Haftar's gains. By mid-2020, the war settled into a stalemate, with front lines hardening around Sirte.⁷ A ceasefire halted open warfare and froze Libya into zones of control—but it resolved none of the underlying disputes over legitimacy or sovereignty.

Since then, Libya has existed under the rule of two tenuous coalitions. In the west, Dbeibeh's Government of National Unity—installed through a UN-led process in early 2021—governs Tripoli and its environs. In the east, Haftar dominates Cyrenaica through military force buttressed by the political cover of the Tobruk-based House of Representatives. Neither side recognizes the authority of the other. Dbeibeh's mandate was intended to expire after national elections in December 2021; those elections never occurred. Instead, Libya's interim arrangements calcified into permanence. Dbeibeh remains in office despite eroding legitimacy, while Haftar's allies have periodically attempted to install rival prime ministers to challenge Tripoli's claim to national authority.⁸ As the UN's Special Representative observed in 2025, *all* of Libya's governing institutions have now outlived their mandates—an indictment not only of Libyan elites, but of a peace process that rewards obstruction.⁹

Beneath these rival governments lies an even more fragmented reality. Power on the ground is exercised by militias and local strongmen whose loyalties are transactional and contingent. In Tripoli, the GNU governs through accommodation with armed groups that function as both security providers and political kingmakers.¹⁰ In the east, Haftar's LNA is itself a coalition—part regular force,

⁶ Unit for Political Studies, "Will the Defeat of Haftar in the West of Libya Lead to Reviving the Political Process?," *Situation Assessment* (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 21 April 2020), <https://www.dohainstitute.org/>.

⁷ Jason Pack and Wolfgang Pusztai, "Turning the Tide: How Turkey Won the War for Tripoli," Policy Paper (Washington: Middle East Institute, November 2020): <https://www.mei.edu/>.

⁸ Driss Rejichi, "Libya: Tripoli in dangerous standoff as PM set on reining in last opponents in the west," *Middle East Eye*, 17 October 2025, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/>.

⁹ "Briefing Security Council, Special Representative Highlights Libya's Fragile Security, Economic Progress, Urges Renewed Commitment to Elections," Press Release SC/16192 (press release, United Nations Security Council, 14 October 2025), <https://press.un.org/>.

¹⁰ "Libyan armed groups agree with authorities on security in Tripoli and borders," *Arab Weekly*, 24 August 2024, <https://thearabweekly.com/>.

part tribal militia, part Salafist formation—held together by patronage and external backing.¹¹ This produces a volatile equilibrium in which alliances are temporary and violence is never far from the surface.

Recent events underscore the fragility of this order. The assassination of prominent Tripoli militia leader Mahmoud “Ghnewa” al-Kikli in May 2025 triggered the capital’s worst fighting in years, as erstwhile allies turned on one another in a scramble for territory and influence.¹² In September 2025, clashes erupted again when Dbeibeh attempted to curb the power of a nominally loyal militia, the Special Deterrence Force, sparking battles over control of Tripoli’s airport and key security nodes.¹³ These episodes reveal the core pathology of Libya’s post-2011 system: any effort to impose authority—whether by reforming security institutions or rebalancing power—risks detonating the very coalitions that sustain a fragile peace.

Libya today is not governed so much as *managed*—by armed actors who profit from disorder and by political elites who fear the consequences of genuine unification. It is a state suspended between collapse and consolidation, where stability is episodic, legitimacy is absent, and violence remains the ultimate arbiter of political disputes.

The fragmentation is not merely political; it is military, institutional, and systemic. Libya is ruled, in the loosest sense, by overlapping authorities rather than by a sovereign state. Governance suffers accordingly. Basic services remain unreliable or nonexistent in many regions. Corruption flourishes as militias, political patrons, and their entourages siphon oil revenues and foreign assistance. For ordinary Libyans, daily life is shaped by insecurity—militia checkpoints, rolling power outages, and the ever-present risk that a localized dispute will erupt into armed conflict.

Even Libya’s most critical national institutions have been reduced to bargaining chips. The National Oil Corporation and the Central Bank—once pillars of state continuity—have been repeatedly hijacked in the struggle between east and west. In 2024, disputes over Central Bank leadership prompted Haftar’s camp to impose an oil blockade, slashing production to a fraction of capacity and rattling global energy markets until a political deal restored exports.¹⁴ Libya possesses Africa’s largest proven oil reserves, and its roughly one million barrels per day of production

¹¹ Matteo Capasso et al., *Libya: Country Report* (Brussels: EU-LISTCO, April 2025), <https://www.cidob.org/>.

¹² “Explainer: What’s happening in Tripoli, Libya’s contested capital?” *BBC Monitoring*, 21 May 2025, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/>.

¹³ “Libya Stands at the Brink of More Fighting,” *Soufan Group*, 8 September 2025, <https://thesoufancenter.org/>.

¹⁴ Agence France-Presse, “Libya east administration says closes oil fields over Central Bank rift,” *Al-Monitor*, 26 August 2024, <https://www.al-monitor.com/>.

accounts for nearly all state revenue.¹⁵ When conflict disrupts that flow—as it did repeatedly between 2022 and 2024—the consequences are immediate: state coffers are drained, patronage networks tighten their grip, and international oil prices briefly spike. Few cases illustrate more clearly how natural wealth becomes a curse when national institutions lack resilience and legitimacy.

Libya's post-2011 experience is therefore less a failed transition than a cautionary tale of how revolutionary optimism can decay into chronic state weakness. The question—*Will Libya ever be whole again?*—hangs over this trajectory. For now, a frozen stalemate prevails. No faction possesses the coercive power or political legitimacy to reunify the country, yet each retains the capacity to veto any arrangement that threatens its core interests. International ceasefires and roadmaps have succeeded in stopping the shooting, but not in resolving the underlying struggle for authority.

This stalemate should not be mistaken for stability. Libya's political equilibrium is brittle and reversible. As long as rival leaders continue to treat politics as a zero-sum contest, national reconciliation will remain elusive. Indeed, in late 2023, the then-UN envoy for Libya, Abdoulaye Bathily, warned that conditions were rapidly deteriorating and ordinary Libyans were increasingly fearful that prolonged political paralysis could trigger a return to full-scale war.¹⁶ The status quo is unsustainable. Without progress toward unity, Libya risks sliding either into de facto permanent partition or another descent into open conflict.

Whether Libya can ever be made whole again depends on understanding the forces that keep it divided—and identifying what combination of internal pressure and external leverage might finally break the impasse.

Regional Power Plays: Neighbors, Mercenaries, and Proxy Battles

Libya's internal fractures have been widened—and in many cases sustained—by the deliberate intervention of regional and global powers. What began as a domestic uprising metastasized into a proxy contest, turning Libya into a North African analogue of Syria: a weak state hollowed out by foreign patrons arming local clients to advance external agendas. This internationalization of Libya's conflict did not merely complicate peacemaking; it reshaped the battlefield, hardened divisions, and rewarded intransigence.

The decisive phase of this proxy war unfolded during Khalifa Haftar's 2019–2020 offensive against Tripoli. Haftar's Libyan National Army advanced not on Libyan

¹⁵ *Country Analysis Brief: Libya* (Washington: US Energy Information Administration, 3 December 2024), <https://www.eia.gov/>.

¹⁶ "UN Envoy to Libyan Leaders: Resolve Impasse, Do Not Fail the People," *UN News*, 18 December 2023, <https://news.un.org/>.

strength alone, but on foreign backing. Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Russia each saw in Haftar a vehicle for their own interests. For Cairo, he was a bulwark against Islamist forces and a means of securing Egypt's western desert frontier.¹⁷ For Abu Dhabi, Libya represented another front in a regional campaign against political Islam and Turkish influence, justifying extensive arms transfers, air support, and drone operations.¹⁸ For Moscow, Haftar offered something more strategic: a foothold on NATO's southern flank.¹⁹

Russia's deployment of Wagner Group mercenaries to eastern Libya transformed the conflict. Wagner provided experienced fighters, artillery, and air-defense systems, enabling Haftar's advance and entrenching Russian influence in Cyrenaica. Moscow's objectives were clear: expand its Mediterranean presence, secure leverage over European energy flows, and establish military access points that could threaten NATO's southern perimeter.²⁰ Western governments have since warned that Russia's entrenchment in Libya extends its strategic reach deep into North Africa and Europe's near abroad, turning Libya into a pressure node rather than a peripheral conflict.

Haftar's campaign ultimately failed—not because of diplomacy, but because of countervailing foreign force. Turkey intervened decisively on behalf of the Tripoli-based government, deploying military advisors, Bayraktar TB2 drones, and Syrian auxiliary fighters. Ankara's intervention halted Haftar's advance and reversed his gains, producing the mid-2020 stalemate that persists today. In doing so, Turkey established itself as the dominant external power in western Libya.²¹

Turkey's motivations blended ideology and cold calculation. Supporting the UN-recognized government aligned with Ankara's backing of post-Arab Spring political movements and countered the influence of its regional rivals. More importantly, Turkey extracted tangible strategic returns. In late 2019, it concluded a controversial maritime delimitation agreement with Tripoli, advancing its "Blue Homeland" doctrine by asserting expansive claims in the Eastern Mediterranean.²² That deal gave Turkey a direct stake in Libya's political future: any hostile successor

¹⁷ "Haftar Leverages Egypt and Russia's Support While Pursuing Dynastic Rule in Libya," *Al-Estiklal*, December 2024, <https://www.alestiklal.net/>.

¹⁸ "UAE Plans New Offensive in Libya to Expand Influence and Control Key Resources," *Watan*, 27 April 2025, <https://www.watanserb.com/>.

¹⁹ Emadeddin Badi, "Russia is making a fragile pivot from Syria to Libya. The West should beware falling into a new trap," *MENA Source*, 2 January 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

²⁰ Victoria Maldonado, "Strategic Ambitions: Russia's Deepening Military and Geopolitical Footprint in Libya," *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, 24 June 2024, <https://gssr.georgetown.edu/>.

²¹ "Libya's Haftar deepens rapprochement with Turkey," African Press Agency, 28 August 2025, <https://apanews.net/>.

²² Michaël Tanchum, ed., *Eastern Mediterranean in Uncharted Waters: Perspectives on Emerging Geopolitical Realities* (Ankara: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2021), <https://www.kas.de/>.

regime could invalidate it. Ensuring friendly authorities in Tripoli thus became a strategic imperative. In the aftermath of the ceasefire, Ankara consolidated its position through construction contracts, energy deals, and sustained military presence—embedding itself deeply in western Libya’s political economy.

Yet Turkey has not remained doctrinaire. As the conflict froze, Ankara recalibrated. Recognizing that permanent division would limit its leverage, Turkish officials began engaging Haftar and the eastern authorities as well.²³ High-level visits to Benghazi and outreach to Cyrenaican elites reflected a deliberate hedging strategy: maintain Tripoli ties while cultivating influence in the east. By positioning itself as the one actor capable of speaking to all sides, Turkey seeks to become Libya’s indispensable power broker. It also hopes, over time, to broaden acceptance of its maritime agreement by securing eastern acquiescence—potentially easing Greek and Cypriot objections if a future unified Libyan state ratifies the deal. Turkey’s outreach further dovetails with its rapprochement with Egypt, using Libya as a venue for repairing a once-hostile bilateral relationship. This diplomacy is opportunistic, risky, and effective—often more agile than Western efforts constrained by consensus politics.

Beyond Turkey and Russia, a constellation of other actors has shaped Libya’s trajectory. The United Nations, through UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and successive envoys, has remained the primary diplomatic framework, brokering the 2020 ceasefire and the interim unity government in 2021. Yet UN influence is limited by the absence of enforcement power and by the disunity of its member states. The European Union officially backs UN mediation and launched Operation Iriini to enforce the arms embargo, but internal divisions have blunted its effectiveness.²⁴ Italy and Malta prioritize migration control and energy security, cooperating pragmatically with western Libyan authorities and militias.²⁵ France, driven by counterterrorism concerns in the Sahel and commercial interests in eastern Libya, has periodically courted Haftar.²⁶ Europe thus speaks with multiple voices—undermining the very unity it urges upon Libya.

African actors have fared no better. The African Union and Libya’s neighbors, particularly Algeria and Tunisia, have attempted mediation under the banner of “African solutions,” but their initiatives have been overshadowed by heavier

²³ “Libya’s Haftar deepens rapprochement with Turkey,” *African Press Agency*.

²⁴ Maurizio Geri, “Mediterranean Security: Operations Iriini, Sea Guardian and Mediterraneo Sicuro,” *Trends Research & Advisory*, 10 May 2023, <https://trendsresearch.org/>.

²⁵ “Malta and Italy Strengthen Collaboration on Migration and Security,” *Malta Daily*, 5 December 2024, <https://maltadaily.mt/>.

²⁶ “Haftar Praises France’s Role in Resolving Libyan Crisis,” *Libya Review*, 24 December 2024, <https://libyareview.com/>.

non-African involvement.²⁷ Still, these states remain deeply exposed to Libya's instability. Algeria fears jihadist spillover and arms trafficking across its southern frontier. Tunisia, hosting hundreds of thousands of Libyan refugees and serving as the base for the US Embassy to Libya since 2014, is acutely vulnerable to renewed conflict.

The cumulative effect of this multi-sided interference has been to prolong Libya's fragmentation. External patrons have encouraged Libyan factions to hold out rather than compromise, fostering the belief that time and foreign backing might yet deliver victory. Instead of a single international strategy, Libya has endured overlapping and often contradictory ones: a UN process here, a Turkish patronage network there, an Egyptian–Russian axis elsewhere. Peace has been managed, not enforced.

For Libya to become whole again, this external tug-of-war must give way to a coordinated international push for settlement. Regional rivals need not become friends—but they must accept that a unified Libya is preferable to an endless proxy contest. There are faint signs of alignment: the Turkey–Egypt rapprochement, quieter Gulf de-escalation, and US efforts to reduce zero-sum competition. Yet suspicion remains endemic. Every external actor wants assurance that reunification will not advantage its adversaries.

Until that assurance exists, Libya's division will persist. Libyans may fight on the ground, but the balance of power is shaped elsewhere—by whose drones dominate the skies, whose mercenaries man the front lines, and whose money sustains the war economy. Breaking this pattern will require an outside-in settlement as much as an inside-out one: a grand bargain among external stakeholders that constrains proxy warfare and creates space for Libyan political compromise. Without it, unity will remain aspirational—and Libya will remain a battlefield for other nations' ambitions.

International Mediation: Peace Efforts and Persistent Deadlock

Libya's collapse has not gone unnoticed by the international community. What it has lacked is not attention, but effectiveness. For more than a decade, the United Nations has led an unbroken chain of mediation efforts, cycling through special envoys charged with reconciling Libya's rival factions and restoring national governance. From the mid-2010s through the present, successive envoys have negotiated

²⁷ "Will the African Union's Mediation Efforts Unite Libya?" *Libya Review*, 12 October 2024, <https://libyareview.com/>.

ceasefires, power-sharing formulas, and election roadmaps. The results have been mixed at best.

UN mediation has produced important but limited achievements. The October 2020 nationwide ceasefire halted large-scale fighting, and the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum that followed produced the interim Government of National Unity in early 2021.²⁸ These were real accomplishments. But they addressed symptoms rather than causes. Implementation of subsequent steps—national elections, unification of institutions, consolidation of civilian authority—has repeatedly stalled. Each approach to the finish line has triggered familiar forms of sabotage: disputes over constitutional frameworks, battles over candidate eligibility, and mutual fears that elections would simply enable the other side to seize power permanently.

By late 2023, UN Special Representative Abdoulaye Bathily abandoned diplomatic euphemism. Addressing the Security Council, he warned that Libya's "protracted institutional and political divisions," compounded by unilateral actions and elite competition over resources, were holding the aspirations of ordinary Libyans hostage.²⁹ In the absence of a unified government and legal framework, he cautioned, Libya's oil revenues were being consumed by patronage rather than invested in stability—raising the risk of economic collapse even as political paralysis persisted. Bathily attempted to break the deadlock by proposing mechanisms to bypass Libya's feuding institutions, including a joint committee to draft election laws. The effort failed. By mid-2024, he stepped aside, another envoy exhausted by the system he was sent to fix.

His successor, Hanna Tetteh of Ghana, inherited the same impasse in early 2025. She continued to press Libya's leaders toward compromise, stressing that endlessly recycled interim arrangements are no substitute for legitimate, unified governance. Under her leadership, UNSMIL convened an advisory committee of Libyan figures, which issued recommendations in mid-2025 calling for a technocratic unity government and a defined electoral timeline.³⁰ The recommendations were sound. The response from Libya's power centers was predictable. The Government of National Unity, the House of Representatives, and Haftar's camp all professed support in principle—while maneuvering to strip the proposals of any provisions that threatened their entrenched interests. Consensus remained performative; obstruction, operational.

²⁸ "Joint Statement Welcoming the Agreement Reached by the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum" (press release, US Department of State, 5 February 2021), <https://2021-2025.state.gov/>.

²⁹ "UN Envoy to Libyan Leaders: Resolve Impasse," *UN News*.

³⁰ "Libya: UNSMIL Presents AC's Report to GNU, PC," *Tripoli Post*, 12 May 2025, <https://www.thetripolipost.org/>.

Other international initiatives have fared no better. The Berlin Process sought to corral external actors into respecting Libya's sovereignty by enforcing the arms embargo and withdrawing foreign fighters. Commitments were made, then quietly ignored. The European Union has publicly supported UN mediation and imposed sanctions on designated spoilers, while launching Operation Irini to interdict weapons shipments. Yet internal EU divisions—particularly between states prioritizing migration control and those focused on counterterrorism or commercial interests—have blunted Europe's influence. Africa-led mediation efforts, championed by the African Union and Libya's neighbors, were marginalized once major powers escalated their involvement. The AU remains a potential contributor to post-conflict monitoring or peacekeeping, but it lacks leverage over the conflict's primary drivers.

Hovering above all these efforts is the United States—the actor with the greatest potential influence, and for much of the past decade, the least visible presence. After the 2012 Benghazi attack, Washington sharply reduced its footprint. The 2011 NATO intervention that toppled Gaddafi was conducted under the banner of “leading from behind,” and what followed was something closer to disengagement. That absence mattered. It created space for regional powers and Russia to become decisive actors in Libya's internal balance of power.³¹

That posture has begun to shift. Russia's growing military presence in Libya, combined with the country's strategic location astride the Mediterranean and its role in energy markets and counterterrorism, has forced Libya back onto Washington's strategic map. In recent years, the United States has more actively supported the UN process and worked to align international partners—while carefully navigating relationships with key regional actors whose interests diverge sharply. Still, US engagement remains reactive rather than decisive.

The cumulative result is a mediation architecture that has succeeded in preventing renewed nationwide war, but failed to produce a unified state. The process has become ritualized: dialogue rounds, technical committees, and expiring roadmaps that generate just enough progress to delay collapse, but not enough to resolve the underlying struggle for power. The UN can convene and cajole, but it lacks the leverage to compel compliance. Without enforcement, mediation becomes theater.

Breaking this deadlock will require more than procedural ingenuity. It will demand stronger alignment among external powers and sustained pressure on Libya's elites to prioritize national survival over factional advantage. That pressure can only come from states with real influence—above all, the United States, working in

³¹ Ari Heistein, *US-Russia Relations Following the 2011 NATO Intervention in Libya* (Istanbul: Global Relations Forum, June 2020), <https://www.gif.org.tr/>.

concert with allies and regional partners. A coordinated diplomatic campaign, backed by credible incentives and penalties, offers the only plausible path out of paralysis. The next section examines what such a US-led strategy would require, and how Washington might finally convert managed stalemate into durable stability.

US Policy and the DIME Framework: A Strategy to Forge Stability

The United States has clear and enduring interests in Libya's future: counterterrorism, regional stability, energy security, and limiting the strategic penetration of rival powers into the central Mediterranean and North Africa. Yet American policy has too often oscillated between overreach and disengagement. What Libya requires instead is a strategy grounded in realism but animated by purpose—one that rejects both the illusion of rapid democratization and the complacency of managed decay. A viable US approach must be assertive without being doctrinaire, engaged without being imperial, and pragmatic without surrendering leadership.

AFRICOM's posture captures this balance. Rather than grandiose nation-building, it emphasizes incremental but consequential steps to create conditions under which Libyans themselves can pursue reunification. As AFRICOM Commander General Michael Langley, USMC, testified to Congress in 2025, national unity cannot be imposed from outside—but it can be enabled. He warned that Libya's fragmented security landscape constitutes a fundamental obstacle to stability, noting that militias operating beyond any unified command structure not only perpetuate violence but periodically disrupt global energy markets when their clashes interrupt oil production.³² His assessment underscores a central truth: Libya's instability is no longer a local tragedy; it is a strategic liability.

Diplomatically, the United States must move from supporting mediation to shaping it. Reestablishing a permanent US diplomatic presence in Libya—conditions permitting—would be a decisive signal of renewed seriousness. Congress has already appropriated funds to reopen the US Embassy in Tripoli, which has operated from Tunis since 2014.³³ A resident ambassador would allow sustained engagement with Libya's political, military, and economic actors, rather than episodic diplomacy conducted at arm's length. Washington should continue engaging all sides of the Libyan divide, making unmistakably clear that US policy favors a unified Libya governed by consent, not force. Unlike regional actors, the United

³² *Statement of General Michael E. Langley, Commander, United States Africa Command, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, 119th Cong., 1st sess. (3 April 2025), <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/>.

³³ Christopher M. Blanchard, "Libya and U.S. Policy," *In Focus*, 22 May 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/>.

States seeks neither oil concessions nor military basing rights, a neutrality that—properly leveraged—confers real diplomatic credibility.

That credibility should be used to impose coherence on an otherwise fractured international approach. The United States is uniquely positioned to convene and align Egypt, Turkey, European partners, and Gulf states around a single political roadmap. Doing so will require uncomfortable conversations—pressing partners to curtail arms transfers, discouraging unilateral maneuvers, and insisting that no faction be indulged as a spoiler. Just as important, Washington must reinforce the authority of the UN process by backing consequences for obstruction. Sanctions against political and militia leaders who deliberately sabotage unity or elections should be applied consistently, and extended when necessary to foreign enablers. Diplomacy without enforcement merely incentivizes delay.

The informational domain is no less consequential. Libya's contest for legitimacy is as much narrative as material. The United States should expand strategic communications that elevate national identity over factionalism and amplify Libyan voices calling for accountable governance. Supporting independent media and civil society initiatives can help erode the militia-driven information ecosystem that thrives on fear and disinformation. At the same time, Washington must counter malign influence. Russian propaganda and Wagner-linked narratives have sought to normalize foreign mercenaries and recast Moscow as a stabilizing force.³⁴ Quiet assistance to Libyan partners in exposing disinformation—whether extremist, criminal, or state-sponsored—can blunt these efforts. Just as importantly, US officials must consistently signal that partition, warlord rule, or military dictatorship will never confer international legitimacy. Repetition matters. In fractured societies, clarity shapes expectations.

Militarily, restraint does not mean absence. While no serious policy contemplates another large-scale intervention, US military influence remains substantial. Counterterrorism operations continue to be essential; Libya's ungoverned spaces have previously allowed ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates to regroup, as evidenced by ISIS's seizure of Sirte in 2015.³⁵ Precision strikes, intelligence sharing, and selective training support remain necessary to prevent a resurgence. Beyond counterterrorism, the US military can play a constructive role if political conditions permit. AFRICOM has repeatedly emphasized that unifying Libya's armed forces under civilian authority is indispensable to sovereignty and stability. If a unity government emerges, US

³⁴ Global Engagement Center, "The Wagner Group's Atrocities in Africa: Lies and Truth" (Washington: US Department of State, 8 February 2024), <https://2021-2025.state.gov/>.

³⁵ "We Feel We Are Cursed': Life under ISIS in Sirte, Libya," *Human Rights Watch*, 18 May 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/>.

and allied forces could support defense institution-building efforts that integrate rival units, professionalize command structures, and reduce militia autonomy.

Symbolic actions already matter. The USS *Mount Whitney's* 2025 port calls in both Tripoli and Benghazi signaled US engagement with all Libyan constituencies. Going forward, a regular US naval presence in the central Mediterranean would reinforce deterrence and signal commitment—not only to Libyans, but to Moscow.³⁶ The United States should also remain open to supporting an international stabilization or peacekeeping mission if requested by a legitimate Libyan authority. Short of that, enhanced monitoring of arms flows and pressure on partner states to honor the embargo can constrain the military balance. Engagement with Libyan security leaders on all sides should reinforce one message above all others: the era of deciding Libya's future by force is over, and renewed large-scale violence will carry costs.

Economically, leverage is both substantial and underused. Libya's oil sector remains the country's only truly national asset—and its most frequent hostage. Preserving the neutrality of the National Oil Corporation and the integrity of the Central Bank is essential. The 2024 agreement to reunify Central Bank leadership and resume exports was a necessary step; it must be followed by a formal, transparent revenue-sharing mechanism that reduces incentives for blockades and resource coercion.³⁷ The United States can facilitate this by convening Libyan financial officials under international auspices and tying revenue distribution to verifiable governance benchmarks.

Anti-corruption measures are equally critical. Technical assistance to Libya's audit and oversight institutions, combined with targeted sanctions against individuals and networks that loot public funds, can begin to alter elite incentives. Development assistance should be selective and stabilizing, not expansive. Libya does not need massive humanitarian aid; it needs institutional repair. Programs that reintegrate militia-affiliated youth into civilian employment, strengthen municipal governance, and rebuild basic infrastructure address the grievances that sustain conflict. Sanctions remain a powerful deterrent—not only against Libyan spoilers but against foreign firms and traffickers profiting from Libya's war economy. The threat of US financial sanctions alone is often sufficient to close channels of illicit trade.

Finally, incentives must be real. A credible path toward unity should unlock tangible rewards: access to frozen sovereign assets, reconstruction assistance, and renewed investment. Persistent obstruction should carry escalating costs. Aligning

³⁶ Alison Bath, "Navy port calls in Libya end half-century lull as US seeks to fortify North Africa presence," *Stars and Stripes*, 22 April 2025, <https://www.stripes.com/>.

³⁷ Charlie Mitchell and Kelly Norways, "Libya's oil output, exports to resume after deal on central bank head," *S&P Global*, 26 September 2024, <https://www.spglobal.com/>.

carrots and sticks is the only way to force a recalculation among Libya's entrenched elites.

Taken together, a DIME-informed strategy demands integration, not sequencing. Diplomacy without pressure invites delay; military engagement without political direction risks entrenchment; economic tools without enforcement become abstractions. This approach avoids the failures of the past. It is neither sentimental nor imperial. It recognizes that power must be balanced, interests aligned, and consequences enforced. Above all, it acknowledges that US strategic interests—countering terrorism, limiting Russian expansion, stabilizing energy markets, and preventing state collapse—converge with Libyans' own interest in sovereignty and peace.

AFRICOM's assessment reinforces the urgency. Libya's location and resources make it a strategic fulcrum between the Mediterranean and the Sahel. Continued instability provides fertile ground for terrorist networks, arms trafficking, and human smuggling—threats that radiate outward to Europe and beyond. Addressing these dangers later will be costlier than confronting them now. Preventing Libya from becoming a permanent vacuum—or a Russian forward operating base—is not an act of charity. It is an act of strategic prudence.

Prospects for Unity: Pathways and Pitfalls

Is there a plausible path for Libya to move from chronic fragmentation toward genuine unity and stability? In the near term, the answer is sobering. The prospects for political reunification—whether through national elections or a sweeping elite bargain—remain poor. Years of accumulated distrust, zero-sum politics, and externally reinforced veto power have hardened Libya's divisions. As of late 2025, Libya's rival leaders continue to prize the preservation of their own authority over the compromises required for national recovery.³⁸

Absent sustained external pressure, the most likely trajectory is continued stagnation: rival governments entrenched in Tripoli and Cyrenaica, periodic militia clashes punctuating an uneasy calm, and foreign patrons maintaining Libyan factions as strategic assets. This “no war, no peace” equilibrium steadily corrodes public confidence and institutional relevance. Libya risks drifting into *de facto* partition—not through formal declaration, but through the quiet normalization of separation and dysfunction.

³⁸ “Briefing Security Council, Special Representative Highlights Libya's Fragile Security, Economic Progress, Urges Renewed Commitment to Elections,” Press Release SC/16192 (press release, United Nations Security Council, 14 October 2025), <https://press.un.org/>.

Yet improbability is not impossibility. Libya's unity remains difficult, but not foreclosed. Several forces—if carefully aligned—could still open a narrow window for progress.

Grassroots Pressure and War-weariness

Across Libya, public patience with the country's entrenched political class is eroding. Recurrent protests in Tripoli, Benghazi, and other urban centers have reflected a rare convergence of grievances: anger at corruption, militia predation, and the chronic failure of the state to deliver basic services. In the summer of 2022 and again in mid-2023, spontaneous demonstrations escalated beyond symbolic dissent, culminating in the storming of the Tobruk parliament building—an unmistakable repudiation of political elites across the east–west divide.

This exhaustion with the status quo constitutes one of the few forces capable of exerting pressure on Libya's insulated power structures. When popular anger is directed simultaneously at rival camps, it undercuts the narrative that Libya's crisis is merely a regional or ideological contest. A cross-regional rejection of the existing elite order—effectively a vote of no confidence in all factions—has the potential to alter elite calculations, particularly if leaders come to fear not just foreign pressure, but domestic backlash.

That potential, however, remains constrained. Libya's protest movements have been episodic, leaderless, and vulnerable to repression or co-optation.³⁹ Street anger alone does not translate into political leverage unless it is channeled through durable organizations capable of sustaining pressure over time. Civil society remains weak, fragmented, and often exposed to militia intimidation. External actors cannot manufacture grassroots legitimacy, but they can reinforce it at the margins. The United States and the United Nations can do so by insisting that civil society representatives, municipal leaders, and professional associations are included in political dialogues—broadening the process beyond the familiar circle of armed elites.

War-weariness reinforces this dynamic. The relative reduction in large-scale violence since 2020 has not produced peace, but it has produced fatigue. Many Libyans—fighters included—have little appetite for a return to full-scale war. For militia members, constant mobilization has yielded diminishing returns, particularly as economic conditions worsen and foreign patronage becomes less reliable. Under the right conditions, segments of these groups may accept demobilization or in-

³⁹ Jennifer Holleis and Mohamed Farhan, "Between chaos and democracy: Libya at crossroads again," *Deutsche Welle*, 30 May 2025, <https://www.dw.com/>.

tegration into state structures, provided credible security guarantees and alternative livelihoods are available.

The current lull in violence therefore represents a narrow but consequential opening. It is easier to consolidate peace when the guns are largely silent than when they are firing. Whether Libya can exploit this window depends on whether public frustration can be transformed from episodic protest into sustained political pressure—and whether external actors are prepared to protect and amplify those nonviolent pathways before renewed conflict forecloses them.

Changes in the Regional Environment

Shifts in the broader Middle East and North Africa have begun to modestly improve the external conditions surrounding Libya's conflict. Chief among these is the thaw in relations between Turkey and Egypt, once the principal regional antagonists backing opposing sides in Libya's civil war.⁴⁰ Both capitals now have reasons to favor de-escalation. Ankara seeks to consolidate its gains in western Libya without becoming indefinitely entangled in an open-ended commitment. Cairo, for its part, wants a stable western frontier and has little appetite for sustaining a permanent proxy conflict on its doorstep.

If Turkey and Egypt can converge on a shared approach—supporting a transitional Libyan leadership acceptable to both—the stalemate could be loosened. Such an arrangement would likely be pragmatic rather than ideal: a civilian figure at the political helm to reassure western constituencies, paired with a defense structure that preserves eastern security interests. This would not resolve Libya's deeper institutional weaknesses, but it could reduce the external vetoes that have repeatedly derailed political progress.

Elsewhere in the region, the momentum for proxy warfare has slowed. Gulf states that once viewed Libya as a key battleground in broader ideological struggles have recalibrated their priorities. The aftereffects of the Yemen war and a renewed focus on economic diversification have dampened enthusiasm for sustained military patronage abroad.⁴¹ Reduced financial and logistical backing from these actors would not end Libya's conflict, but it would lower the ceiling of escalation and narrow the options available to spoilers.

Russia remains the most consequential wildcard. Moscow's deployment of Wagner mercenaries into eastern Libya provided Haftar with critical capabilities and

⁴⁰ Alia Brahimi, "Turkey and Egypt want better relations. But will Libya doom the rapprochement?" *Atlantic Council*, 23 January 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

⁴¹ Maddalena Procopio and Corrado Cok, "Diversification nations: The Gulf way to engage with Africa," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 24 March 2025, <https://ecfr.eu/>.

granted Russia a strategic foothold in the central Mediterranean. Yet Russia's position is no longer as assured as it once was. The decapitation of Wagner's leadership in 2023 and the sustained demands of the war in Ukraine have strained Moscow's expeditionary posture.⁴² Should Russia's influence in Libya weaken—or should the Kremlin calculate that a negotiated settlement better serves its interests—one of the most formidable external obstacles to Libyan unity would recede.

That outcome, however, would require firmness from the West. Any move by a future Libyan government to expel foreign mercenaries would need clear international backing. This opens the possibility, however limited, of a transactional understanding with Moscow: withdrawal of mercenary forces in exchange for constrained economic participation in post-conflict reconstruction. Such an arrangement would be unsatisfying and fraught with risk, but diplomacy in fractured states often advances through imperfect bargains rather than moral clarity.

Collectively, these regional shifts do not guarantee progress in Libya. They merely reduce some of the external pressures that have sustained division. Whether this opening is exploited will depend on sustained diplomatic engagement—particularly by the United States—to translate reduced rivalry into coordinated restraint. Without that effort, regional détente may prove temporary, and Libya will remain hostage to the next turn in great-power competition.

Institutional Bridging Efforts

Despite Libya's entrenched political split, limited efforts to preserve national institutions have persisted beneath the surface. These initiatives are not acts of reconciliation so much as exercises in mutual self-preservation—but they matter nonetheless. The recent reunification of the Central Bank's leadership, which allowed oil production to resume after prolonged eastern blockades, stands as a notable example. Similarly, the National Oil Corporation, though frequently contested, has largely retained its status as a national entity, with revenues continuing to flow through a single account prior to distribution. These arrangements endure for a simple reason: no faction ultimately benefits from turning off the country's only reliable source of income.

Such technocratic compromises demonstrate that Libya's rival camps are capable of cooperation when incentives align. They do not resolve the legitimacy crisis, but they prevent economic collapse and create functional linkages that can later support political progress. Expanding these institutional bridges—particularly in

⁴² "Russia's Africa Corps: Wagner's Successor in Africa (2022–2025)," Robert Lansing Institute, 30 September 2025, <https://lansinginstitute.org/>.

finance, energy, and security—offers one of the few credible pathways toward gradual reintegration.

The 5+5 Joint Military Commission illustrates this dynamic. Composed of senior officers from both eastern and western forces, the commission has met regularly since 2020 to monitor the ceasefire and explore avenues for security coordination. Its existence reflects a shared recognition that uncontrolled escalation would be disastrous for all sides.⁴³ In November 2024, Turkey’s hosting of eastern and western military representatives marked a further step in confidence-building—remarkable given Ankara’s earlier role as a partisan actor.⁴⁴ While expectations should remain modest, even incremental agreements—such as joint protection of oil facilities or limited coordination between units—could generate momentum toward broader security unification.

Recent developments suggest that even limited security-sector integration is no longer merely aspirational. In late 2025, General Dagvin Anderson, newly appointed Commander of US Africa Command, made a landmark visit to both Tripoli and Benghazi—one of the few senior international figures to do so in close succession. During that visit, Anderson announced that Libya would, for the first time, host elements of AFRICOM’s flagship Flintlock exercise in 2026.⁴⁵

The significance of this decision lies not in symbolism, but in structure. Flintlock is not a ceremonial engagement; it is a demanding multinational exercise focused on interoperability, command-and-control coordination, and professional military standards. By involving Libyan personnel from both eastern and western forces in joint preparation and execution, the exercise creates a rare, practical venue for cooperation outside the zero-sum logic of national politics. As Anderson noted, Libyans “from the east and west will work together” in preparation for the exercise—an incremental but meaningful step toward integrating military institutions long divided by parallel chains of command.⁴⁶

Just as important was Anderson’s emphasis on dialogue rather than diktat. By meeting leaders on both sides and framing US involvement as capacity-building rather than arbitration, AFRICOM reinforced a central principle of its Libya engagement: stability cannot be imposed, but it can be enabled. Flintlock 2026 does not resolve Libya’s legitimacy crisis, nor does it guarantee durable security

⁴³ Agenzia Nova, “Libya: the joint military commission reassures on the stability of the ceasefire,” Nova News, 26 August 2024, <https://www.agenzianova.com/>.

⁴⁴ “Turkiye National Defence Ministry hosts Libya military joint commission delegation,” Middle East Monitor, 28 November 2024, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/>.

⁴⁵ Patrick M Foughty, “Gen. Dagvin Anderson Marks First Visit to Libya; Stresses Unity and Peace Among Leaders,” US Africa Command, 2 December 2025, <https://www.dvidshub.net/>.

⁴⁶ Foughty, “Gen. Dagvin Anderson Marks First Visit to Libya.”

unification. But it does demonstrate that under the right conditions—external restraint, mutual incentives, and professional frameworks—cooperation between Libya’s rival military establishments is possible.

This development should be viewed soberly. Exercises do not erase political fragmentation, and military confidence-building can collapse if political conditions deteriorate. Still, Flintlock’s partial relocation to Libya marks a qualitative shift: from managing separation to cautiously testing integration. In a conflict defined by frozen lines and hardened distrust, even provisional cooperation of this kind represents progress worth consolidating.

Local governance offers a parallel avenue for institutional repair. Municipal authorities and tribal leaders frequently cooperate across front lines on pragmatic issues such as electricity distribution, trade, and public services. These interactions are driven less by ideology than by necessity, yet they have known a degree of success absent at the national level. Expanding local elections or structured municipal dialogues that include all regions could reinforce this bottom-up cooperation and create pressure for national political progress. Libya’s mayors and local councils, accustomed to problem-solving rather than grandstanding, may prove more capable of forging a functional social compact than the country’s entrenched political elites.

None of these efforts should be overstated. Technocratic coordination is not political reconciliation, and institutional bridges can collapse if elites again choose confrontation over compromise. Still, in a fragmented state where sweeping solutions remain elusive, these modest linkages matter. They preserve the skeletal framework of a national system—one that, under more favorable conditions, could be rebuilt into something resembling a unified state.

A Phased Power-Sharing Deal

If Libya is to escape permanent fragmentation, the most realistic path forward may lie not in an immediate leap to elections, but in a carefully constructed interim power-sharing arrangement. Past efforts failed largely because they triggered winner-take-all anxieties: each faction feared that compromise would become a prelude to its own marginalization. A transitional framework that gives all major players a stake—however unpalatable—may be the only way to break this cycle.

Such an arrangement would necessarily be limited in scope and duration. A small presidential council or unity cabinet, balanced across Libya’s western, eastern, and southern regions, could provide a temporary center of authority without allowing any single faction to dominate. The mandate would be narrow but consequential: unify core economic and security institutions, stabilize governance, and prepare the ground for national elections. To reduce polarization, it would be essential that Libya’s most divisive figures not occupy the top executive roles. Neither Abdul

Hamid Dbeibeh nor Khalifa Haftar could credibly preside over a unifying transition. Their participation, if any, would need to be indirect—through guarantees of security or political inclusion rather than executive control. A neutral technocrat or broadly respected elder figure would be better positioned to manage the interim phase.

The incentives for such a deal are substantial. Participation in a unity framework would confer international recognition, unlock reconstruction assistance, and potentially release Libya's frozen sovereign assets abroad. These are powerful inducements for elites who depend on patronage networks and external legitimacy. The disincentives must be equally clear. Continued obstruction should trigger escalating sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and pressure from domestic constituencies whose living conditions will only deteriorate further under stalemate.

History offers no illusion that such elite bargains are just or elegant. Lebanon's Taif Agreement and Bosnia's Dayton Accords were deeply flawed, rewarding armed actors with political relevance and deferring questions of accountability. Yet both succeeded in halting wars that had become unsustainable. Libya's circumstances are different, but the logic is similar. An imperfect peace that freezes conflict and restores basic state functions may be preferable to a principled paralysis that guarantees continued decay.

The United States would need to play a decisive role in brokering and enforcing such a deal. American leverage with regional actors is critical to neutralizing external spoilers, while US diplomatic weight can help ensure that Libyan signatories adhere to their commitments. Without sustained external enforcement, any power-sharing arrangement would quickly unravel.

Even then, risks abound. Libya's 2021 unity experiment collapsed once elections were delayed, reminding observers that interim arrangements can harden into permanent dysfunction. Elections remain essential to restoring legitimacy—Libyans have not voted since 2014—but they also represent the most dangerous phase of any transition. Rushed or poorly designed elections could reignite conflict, particularly if the rules of the game are contested or the results rejected.

For elections to succeed, preconditions must be established. Security guarantees, clear acceptance mechanisms, and an agreed constitutional framework are non-negotiable. Defining executive authority—especially constraining a winner-take-all presidency—will be essential to reducing elite fear of electoral defeat. International monitoring, and potentially a limited peacekeeping presence, may be required to deter violence and reassure losing parties. The lesson of the aborted 2021 election attempt is unambiguous: sequencing matters. Stability must precede ballots.

Ultimately, Libya's future hinges on whether its leaders and citizens can reconstruct a shared sense of nationhood after years of division. Trust will not be restored through declarations or conferences, but through incremental, verifiable steps that

demonstrate restraint, inclusion, and competence. The international community can provide security guarantees and economic support, but unity cannot be imposed from outside.

Libya's divisions are not rooted in immutable ethnic or sectarian fault lines. They are products of power struggles, geography, and institutional collapse. Beneath the fragmentation remains a shared national identity and a collective exhaustion with disorder. If those sentiments are harnessed—carefully and pragmatically—they may yet provide the foundation for a unified Libyan state.

Conclusion: A Strategy for Wholeness

Will Libya ever be whole again? No serious analyst can answer that question with certainty. The pessimistic case is strong. Libya's fractures have endured long enough to risk hardening into permanence, with rival authorities in Tripoli and Cyrenaica governing through militia bargains and foreign patronage while the population adjusts, grimly, to dysfunction. The prevailing trajectory points toward a prolonged frozen conflict—neither war nor peace, neither unity nor collapse.

Yet this outcome is not foreordained. Libya's current condition is not the product of immutable social divisions or civilizational fault lines, but of political predation, institutional collapse, and sustained external interference. Those forces can be countered. With disciplined engagement by Libyans themselves, reinforced by coordinated international pressure—above all from the United States—there remains a plausible path toward gradual reintegration. It will not be swift, and it will not be elegant. States broken by upheaval rarely repair themselves spontaneously. They are rebuilt, piece by piece, through persistence, leverage, and the refusal to accept disorder as a permanent condition.

For the United States, the case for engagement is not sentimental; it is strategic. A unified and stable Libya would anchor security in North Africa, contribute to energy market stability, constrain terrorist networks, and deny rival powers a forward operating base on NATO's southern flank. A perpetually fractured Libya, by contrast, exports instability—through terrorism, arms trafficking, irregular migration, and geopolitical leverage for Moscow and others. The costs of neglect were made plain after 2011, when Libya became a breeding ground for ISIS and a conduit for weapons flooding the Sahel. Those lessons should not be relearned.

The path forward is incremental, not transformative. It begins with preserving and expanding ceasefire arrangements, reinforcing technocratic institutions that still function, and preventing renewed militia escalation. It requires unifying economic governance, particularly oil revenue management, to remove incentives for coercion and blockade. It depends on constructing an interim political framework that diffuses winner-take-all fears while preparing the ground for legitimate elections. And it

demands careful sequencing: stability before ballots, rules before contests, enforcement before promises. Each step will be fragile. Setbacks are inevitable. That is precisely why sustained international engagement—rather than episodic diplomacy—is indispensable.

A credible US strategy must also reject half-measures. Diplomatic ambiguity and indulgence of spoilers have prolonged Libya's paralysis. Washington should state plainly that partition, renewed civil war, and mercenary-dominated governance are unacceptable outcomes—and be prepared to back that position with consequences. This does not imply reckless intervention, but it does require resolve: coordinated sanctions, pressure on external enablers, support for enforcement mechanisms, and readiness to deter large-scale violence if red lines are crossed. Peace processes survive not on good intentions, but on credible enforcement.

Skeptics will argue that Libya's elites will never compromise, that foreign interference will never recede, or that US attention is better spent elsewhere. Such fatalism is tempting—and dangerous. Libya's modern history is punctuated by abrupt inflection points after long stagnation. Few anticipated the regime's collapse in 2011. Fewer still predicted the decisive Turkish intervention in 2020. Change in Libya rarely announces itself in advance. When opportunity emerges, the decisive variable will be whether the United States and its partners are positioned to shape it—or merely observe it.

American leadership remains the essential variable. If the United States leads—patiently, strategically, and with clear-eyed realism—Libya has a fighting chance to move beyond managed fragmentation toward a functional, sovereign state. If Washington abdicates that role, Libya will remain a chessboard for others, its divisions calcifying into permanence. The stakes are high, but so is the opportunity: to prevent another failed state and to demonstrate that sustained engagement, properly applied, can still bend fragile states toward stability.

Libya can be whole again. But it will require discipline over drift, leverage over hope, and engagement over resignation. The window is narrow, and it will not remain open indefinitely. The time to act is now—before fragmentation becomes destiny. 🦅

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