BUILDING SECURITY: HOW EUROPEANS CAN HELP REFORM LIBYA

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February 2022

SUMMARY

- Since 2011, divided governance structures in Libya have weakened the state's monopoly on the use of force, as have the proliferation of armed groups and their gradual infiltration of security institutions across the country.

- One of the persistent errors of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration in Libya is the assumption that combatants can be bought off.

- Another is the assumption that security sector reform (SSR) depends on the right personalities rather than systems and processes.

- Europeans' short-term stabilisation imperatives – notoriously, those related to migration and counter-terrorism – have repeatedly led to reactive policymaking that only deepens instability.

- For Europeans to play a meaningful SSR role, they will need a shared strategy and operational principles.

- But they will also need to recognise that they will initially have limited room for manoeuvre and that this will be a medium- to long-term effort.

- In the short term, Europeans should support the establishment of a Libyan-owned SSR body that can lead nationwide efforts in conjunction with UN diplomacy.

- This should be accompanied by a greater focus on strengthening bottom-up security initiatives that can help stabilise the country and restore European influence.

Introduction

A decade after the demise of Muammar Qaddafi, Libya's security sector is in chaos. The security structures are divided, predatory, and a clear threat to political progress and stabilisation initiatives in the country.

There have been various efforts at security sector reform (SSR) in recent years, but none have gotten very far. Libyan and European policymakers have used semi-formal forces to serve their short-term interests, neglecting to professionalise the country's security services in a manner that would contribute to stability nationwide. To be sure, SSR and disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR), separate but complementary processes, have been part of internationally led peacebuilding efforts in Libya since 2014, when the United Nations launched the Libyan dialogue process. However, policymakers have too often treated SSR and DDR as an afterthought rather than as critical steps towards peace.

This remains the case, as exemplified by the actions of the Joint Military Commission (JMC). The JMC formed in summer 2020 after the collapse of Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar's offensive against Tripoli. It presented itself as a vehicle to secure the peace, unify Libya's militias, and address the country's SSR challenges. Since its initial contribution to the conclusion of a ceasefire agreement in October 2020, however, the JMC has been broadly neglected by all major stakeholders and, as the personification of international security assistance policy in Libya, has atrophied.

But this story is not only one of neglect. Worse, Libyan and European leaders are exploiting the country's anarchic security landscape for short-term gains. The former sponsor various militias for financial and political gain; the latter do so to pursue narrow migration and counter-terrorism policy goals within a grey zone of international norms and laws. But these obsessions have blinded them to the medium- and long-term effects of the hybrid nature of Libya's security sector: uncontrollable armed groups, political inertia, abuses of power, frequent outbreaks of violence, and chronic instability in neighbouring countries and, potentially, southern Europe.

However, during a lull in the conflict, policymakers now have an opportunity to begin correcting this. The failure of Libya's most recent electoral process has frustrated international actors who want to stabilise the country and has prompted them to explore other avenues for progress, including SSR. Most Libyans are weary of elites' transactional approaches to governance; yet these elites are looking for new ways forward, as can be seen in recent meetings and increasing cooperation between forces

that were once enemies. For European states – whose influence in Libya has been weakened by their own divisions as well as the more muscular interventions of Turkey, Russia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates – focusing on SSR also creates an opportunity to repair partnerships and build local resilience against the influence of their rivals in Libya. European policymakers rightfully sense a need to strengthen Libyan sovereignty and use a revamped security sector to forge sustainable partnerships on its priorities, which range from migration initiatives to efforts to counter hostile state actors. Moreover, progress on SSR is a prerequisite for any new political track to succeed in delivering elections, a government capable of governing, or the genuine consensus needed for Libya to move out of its transitional period.

There is no silver bullet in SSR: Europeans know from experience to limit their expectations in Libya, but there is still space for Europe to increase its engagement with the country's security sector in line with its long-term interests. If Europeans help Libya's leadership organise the security sector coherently and support clear, bottom-up security initiatives (such as those led by civil society), they will help stabilise the country and restore some of their influence. Moreover, Libya's leadership has long been frustrated with the presence of foreign forces and their failure to advance a comprehensive SSR policy. This has now created the space for a different kind of intervention – one more suited to European talents.

When planning for SSR in Libya, European states should focus on initiatives involving both the leadership and the Libyan population. They will need to take a more strategic, longer-term approach that addresses not just their own policy priorities but also the security needs of the Libyan people (as opposed to the authorities that are currently in place). Short-term stabilisation imperatives – notoriously, those related to migration and counter-terrorism – have repeatedly led to reactive European policymaking that only deepens instability. A better approach would be to develop an institutional partner capable of aligning with Europe's strategic vision, strengthening the rule of law, and protecting Libyans through the development of key oversight and accountability mechanisms.

Europeans need to work to establish professional standards in the security sector, helping Libya's institutions evolve in a way that will make them effective in the long term. They should also support local groups that already engage in important security functions such as joint patrols around the ceasefire line, the protection of key economic assets, and policing activities. European support can help them make improvements that are sustainable in the long term and tied to other aspects of Libya's transition, such as the political process and national reconciliation.

Europeans will have to be nimble enough to dodge, co-opt, or block the litany of Libyan and

international spoilers who would seek to disrupt this approach. They will need to condition political and economic support for Libyan actors (including the current government) on support for holistic SSR. Meanwhile, Europeans should try to bring along core allies in the effort, aiming to isolate powers such as Russia – which will always be opposed to reform. This should have become easier following the recent detente in the Middle East and North Africa, which has already brought the UAE, Turkey, and Egypt closer to one another. All three states could accept European leadership on SSR so long as they do not fear they will be side-lined in the process.

A chaotic security sector

In the aftermath of its revolution, Libya was forced to reckon with the legacy of its long-ruling leader, Qaddafi. For decades, he intentionally weakened the security sector and ensured that it lacked any form of civilian oversight.

Since the revolution, divided governance structures have weakened the state's monopoly on the use of force, as have the proliferation of armed groups and their gradual infiltration of security institutionsthroughout the country. As Libya's depleted and divided security forces failed to fulfil their role, Libyan politicians progressively 'hybridised' security institutions out of desperation, opportunism, or simple fear – as powerful militias sought greater legitimacy under the umbrella of the state. For instance, Libya's first parliament, the General National Congress (GNC), was regularly raided by militias that obstructed sessions and intimidated lawmakers, hoping to protect their benefits and extract further concessions. This problem was amplified by political factions that used the same tactics to bully their rivals and strengthen themselves.

Informal forces were progressively integrated into security institutions wholesale, before formalising their roles with pre-existing loyalties and command structures intact. But this only worsened the situation, especially as these armed groups then fought one another for positions of power and access to state finances. The government compounded these errors because it lacked the political will to disarm and demobilise such groups prior to their integration into security institutions – or to change course in broader SSR efforts after establishing the precedent. Some Libyan politicians thought they saw an opportunity to institutionalise armed groups they could control, hoping to use them to weaken their political opponents or gain other benefits.

One of the persistent errors of DDR in Libya is the assumption that combatants can simply be bought off. Another is the assumption that SSR depends on the right personalities rather than the right

systems and processes. Both fallacies are still prevalent today.

For instance, the National Transitional Council decided in late 2011 to grant salaries to members of supposedly revolutionary armed groups, but this did little to disarm, demobilise, or reintegrate them and much to deplete the budget and advertise how joining a militia could provide a livelihood. The rush to DDR after the 2011 war reduced democratic control over the security sector to replacing Qaddafi-era officers with revolutionary figures. The lead policy at the time, the Libyan Programme for Reintegration and Development (LPRD) – originally known as the Warriors Affairs Commission – was long on enthusiasm and short on planning and technical nous. It failed to identify how to restructure institutional command and control or appropriately develop and staff modern, democratic, and functional security structures. These problems were exacerbated by a lack of appreciation of the strong bonds that revolutionary brigades (and, later, militias) formed during combat – which meant they needed to be fully demobilised and disarmed before they would be capable of integration into state structures and a new chain of command.

From the perspective of local communities, these were the central failures of DDR efforts under the government-funded LPRD, which focused on integrating ex-combatants into the security sector rather than civilian life and vocational training programmes. In fact, in its 2011-2015 Progress Report, the LPRD reported having signed Memoranda of Understanding with multiple security institutions to integrate 38,000 ex-combatants. By contrast, only 1,400 individuals received vocational training during the same period through the LPRD's Economic Reintegration and Civic Empowerment programmes. It was a strategic mistake to legitimise the overexpansion of Libya's security apparatus, even if the government did this in full coordination with the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL).

There is now a consensus that integrating militiamen into regular police and armed forces was a recipe for disaster that hampered efforts to enforce the rule of law, as untrained ex-combatants assumed policing roles for which they were unqualified. Moreover, the authorities conducted this process without changing their command structure to provide civilian oversight of their activities. This was especially damaging because some of these highly localised groups used their official status and access to resources to strengthen their relationships within the local community – providing benefits for which they got the credit, at the expense of the state.

Meanwhile, Libya's foreign partners – such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Turkey – also helped integrate militias into the security services rather than civilian life. These countries' efforts were hampered by improper vetting and the prioritisation of expediency over efficacy. The most infamous of these early projects was the UK's attempt to train 2,000 Libyan

soldiers in Cambridge – an initiative that collapsed after unvetted Libyan cadets overran their British trainers and committed numerous crimes, including rape. These types of uncoordinated international SSR efforts generally also failed to provide Libyan recruits with the training they needed to perform their functions effectively after integration, with most projects squeezing what should have been years of vital academic study into courses that lasted weeks or, at best, months.

The formation of two rival governments in 2014 only made matters worse, as no civilian authority was deemed legitimate enough to command armed groups. With various political groups controlling associated militias, SSR and DDR initiatives became politicised, contested, and limited to certain groups. Despite these failures, the authorities only made cosmetic changes to high-level SSR and DDR policy, while trying to integrate armed units into newly created bodies. For example, pushed by the US and some European states, the Government of National Accord established in 2016 the Presidential Guard, which ended up being a partisan attempt at integration. This militia-style body only weakened state control in the capital, which quickly fell under the control of groups in the so-called Tripoli Cartel. The situation highlighted how attempts to separate rather than sequence DDR and SSR cause both to fail.

Today, some armed groups are a law unto themselves, while others remain aligned with competing political factions. As was clear in the build-up to the election that was scheduled for December 2021 (but that never took place), both types of militias have tried to block certain leaders' efforts to participate in the electoral process and have thereby undermined it.

Following successive waves of politicised mass integration, Libya's security sector is now estimated to comprise 400,000 people, or around 6 per cent of the population. This makes SSR and DDR all the more difficult. It also deepens the country's political and governance challenges, particularly now that armed groups have gained control of various ministries.

How SSR fed a proxy war

Part of the reason why Libya's DDR efforts have failed is that the authorities did not sequence the integration of ex-combatants based on an accurate assessment of the requirements of Libya's security sector, which would have required detailed internal and external analysis of the threats the country faced. Such analysis should inform SSR and DDR doctrines and policy that stem from the international peace process. Unsurprisingly, however, domestic and international pressure in the aftermath of the revolution made it difficult to conduct accurate assessments of this kind.

Qaddafi purposefully neglected and weakened the formal security services out of fear that a young officer would follow in his footsteps by launching a coup. So, after the revolution, Libya lacked the technical expertise to design functional modern security services or readjust to a post-war reality characterised by the proliferation of weapons and armed groups. The failures of DDR then created new challenges for Libya's already fragile officer class, politics, and the rule of law in dealing with well-equipped militias. These problems were compounded by the behaviour of political elites – who, as discussed, tried to use militias to dominate one another. Accordingly, SSR initiatives became politicised attempts to strengthen one's own camp. International actors preferred to pursue quick wins in the form of glamorous train and equip projects rather than the prolonged close contact and tedious technical assistance that SSR required.

The politicisation of SSR only intensified as Libya's conflict spiralled into an international proxy war. Since 2011, proxy actors have conducted train and equip projects primarily designed to enhance the influence and legitimacy of their clients. Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) exemplifies this dynamic. The United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and other states have since 2014 organised, financed, and built up the LAAF, aiming to install a friendly strongman at the head of Libya's government. Similarly, Turkey's approach to SSR engagement began with an effort to help Libyans halt Haftar's offensive on Tripoli, but it is now a politicised attempt to train, equip, and bolster favoured armed groups or politicians.

These projects have violated the UN arms embargo on Libya that has been in place since 2011 and have involved the sponsorship of foreign mercenaries from Syria, Sudan, Chad, and Russia. As such, the initial failure of SSR not only doomed DDR projects but also opened the door for the internationalisation of the conflict.

A faltering transition

Thanks to the geopolitical dynamics that both started and ended Haftar's offensive against Tripoli, the discussions of nationwide security arrangements that evolved in October 2020 into a ceasefire agreement were largely an international rather than a Libyan affair. The same is true of the subsequent UN political road map for Libya. Through these initiatives, the country's political process; security sector dynamics; and foreign political, security, and economic interests have become increasingly entangled with one another.

The JMC is a case in point. Formed in summer 2020 to bring together five officers each from eastern

and western Libya, the commission established Libyan control of what had been a de facto ceasefire agreement between Turkey and Russia. The UN conceived of the JMC during Haftar's offensive against Tripoli, hoping that the body would bring the warring parties together to manage a ceasefire process and, in turn, promote institutional unification and SSR.

But the UN failed to implement the policy until others had ended the offensive. This changed the JMC's raison d'être. It was no longer a peacemaking body but a peacekeeping one, a façade for arrangements involving international actors. The commission was staffed by relatively uninfluential officers rather than decision-makers or notable commanders. They quickly came to a formal ceasefire agreement that called for all foreign forces to leave Libya within six months – something they were never able to achieve but that played into Libyan and Western desires to eject the many foreign fighters who joined the battle for Tripoli.

With its primary purpose fulfilled, the JMC fell into neglect. As the international community turned its attention to the political transition, it missed a valuable opportunity to bolster the body and help it agree on a vision for the Libyan security services. The JMC drifted, reduced to conducting a box-ticking exercise for interim security arrangements. The members of the commission still carried out some important tasks – such as reopening an important coastal trade route across Libya (support was provided by the European Union under its Foreign Policy Instrument and related programmes) and scheduling foreign mercenaries' departure from Libya – but this was not tied to significant planning to sustain security arrangements or to support institutional unification.

Even when foreign powers conducted token withdrawals of their forces, the members of the JMC played no meaningful role in this but were simply wheeled out to endow the event (and themselves) with greater significance. Substantive discussions on institutional unification, SSR, and foreign forces appear to be above their paygrade. This is especially true given that the JMC is headquartered in Sirte – a city where Russia has such a prominent role that it was able to prevent five members of the commission travelling there by air, forcing them to enter by road – and that genuine military unification under the Government of National Unity (GNU) would spell the end for Haftar's ambitions, severely damaging the Libya policies of his foreign sponsors.

Meanwhile, SSR has been largely a side issue in the UN-led political process, which focused on setting an election date at the cost of a broader discussion of stabilisation or even how to facilitate the vote. As such, there is still no vision for Libyan SSR or even a common understanding of its fundamental requirements. This is dangerous, as the reunification of the country under the GNU was supposed to stabilise Libya's political process, facilitate elections, and create the foundations for democratic

progress.

The complexity of the problem and the dangers of trying to oversimplify it became evident in the failed election process. The vote was intended to resolve the legitimacy crisis that comes from having a parliament that was elected in 2014, an upper house that was elected in 2012, and a government that was appointed rather than elected. However, without a holistic plan to structure Libyan politics and governance, the election was never likely to put Libya's political transition back on track. In this context, UN Special Envoy Jan Kubis relied on Libya's unrepresentative politicians to create and implement the electoral process. Unsurprisingly, they designed the process to keep themselves in power, weaken rivals, and maximise both their control over Libya's state apparatus and their opportunities to engage in corrupt practices. The lack of dialogue on SSR and DDR planning and programming created an environment in which Libyan politicians could freely develop their relationships with various armed groups as part of their electoral manoeuvres.

Due to these factors, the election lost all legitimacy. Libyan politicians obstructed any attempts to consensually create electoral laws or a basis for the vote and what came afterwards. Eventually, the speaker of parliament unilaterally passed an electoral law that indefinitely delayed parliamentary elections and created a new position for an all-powerful executive, while lax standards for vetting candidates allowed Haftar to run for the presidency yet retain command of the LAAF. In a sign of what would have happened if the election had gone ahead, Haftar deployed military units to try to force the electoral commission and the judiciary to block the candidacy of his rival Saif al-Islam Qaddafi (who is under indictment by the International Criminal Court). Units aligned with Prime Minister Abdul-Hamid Dabaiba capitalised on public fear that Haftar would gain power in the election to forcibly close polling stations and line offices of the electoral commission. Dabaiba also broke an earlier pledge not to run for president himself. All this increased pressure on the electoral process.

After this convoluted election fizzled out, Kubis was replaced by Stephanie Williams, who Western states helped appoint as special adviser to the UN secretary-general on Libya to try to resurrect the process. But Libya's elites remain more interested in exploiting the lack of a clear electoral process. Rivals to the prime minister are presently manoeuvring to install a new government through the House of Representatives and to leverage associated militias in Tripoli to remove the sitting GNU by force. At the same time, opposing militias have moved into the capital to protect Dabaiba, while he and his political rivals assert rival constitutional tracks as yet another ploy to delay elections.

European leaders, meanwhile, have little influence on events and are quietly hoping that Williams can

somehow restore the electoral process. But, as she is finding out, this will be almost impossible without a more comprehensive political process. As discussed, the security situation has obstructed the electoral process locally and nationally, not least thanks to the blurred line between political elites and conflict actors. As the UN focuses on issues such as the sequence of legislative and presidential elections, a constitutional process, and the establishment of a more robust electoral law, Europeans should look for new ways to maintain momentum for reform and prevent Libya from sliding back into conflict.

Without a conversation on SSR, vital structures to provide security and begin restoring the rule of law will be absent from Libya's institutional planning. This will also mean that security sector investments further hybridise Libya's security sector while neglecting the concept of civilian oversight. This is why there is a need for a more holistic approach towards Libya's reunification and its peace process more generally – one that combines political, security, and even judicial discussions. Otherwise, Libyans will once again try to engage in a transition and build a new state on deeply flawed foundations.

Europeans have shown a growing interest in a new approach to SSR and DDR, thanks to the upcoming deployment of a UN ceasefire monitoring mission to Sirte and increasing international pressure on foreign forces to withdraw from Libya. December 2021 saw the emergence of several foreign-backed efforts at military unification, albeit ones that are only loosely coordinated and are detached from the JMC. These include the Haddad-Nathouri initiative, in which the chiefs of staff of the government and Haftar's forces met for exploratory talks, the Dabaiba-Haftar talks sponsored by the UAE, and a meeting in Rome between Haftar's son and representatives of Tripoli-based armed groups.

Such initiatives are in their early stages and may not genuinely be intended to address security issues, but they could provide Europeans with opportunities to support military unification if the political process remains stalled. There may be no Libyan leaders who have the popular legitimacy Europeans are looking for, but there are still technocrats and commanders within Libya's security sector who could be valuable partners.

European security assistance

The hybrid nature of Libya's security sector, characterised by many armed groups operating outside state control, has created significant legal and procedural obstacles for EU agencies. Libyan leaders' lack of support for SSR has been a significant reason why bilateral and multilateral European support

initiatives never developed beyond poorly executed train-and-equip exercises. Worse still, a lack of conditions attached to European equipment deliveries sometimes allowed the Libyan government to integrate militiamen into the formal security sector before they had received training.

Years of failed security partnerships also reflect Europe's incoherent policy on Libya. European leaders, like their Libyan counterparts, have had no vision for SSR. This has undermined European initiatives in Libya in the long term, with policymakers focused on transient solutions to the problems of the day.

France was one of the first Western countries to back Haftar's burgeoning military autocracy in Cyrenaica, including through training and arms provisions. Paris couched this support in a narrative of law and order, and opposition to terrorism and Islamism. However, French forces and the LAAF did not participate in Libya's biggest counter-terrorism operation of recent years – which removed the Islamic State group from Sirte in 2016, and which was spearheaded by Misratan groups with American, British, and Italian backing. This operation involved logistical and material support, initiatives to build local operational capacity, the deployment of special forces, airstrikes, and initiatives to help construct a cohesive counter-terrorism force. It proved to be more successful and well-contained than the LAAF counter-terrorism campaign, which has become a political and economic behemoth that exploits civilians in the areas under its control.

France, in contrast, appeared to prioritise its partnership with Haftar and regional partners such as the UAE above a common European position. The approach was designed to strengthen the French position in Libya and the Sahel more broadly, but it disregarded Haftar's human rights abuses. This directly weakened international accountability mechanisms, established precedents of impunity for other Libyan actors, and allowed Haftar to remain a troublesome political actor following his military defeat. It also helped Russia and Turkey become kingmakers in Libya, while fuelling Franco-Turkish geopolitical tension, including in the eastern Mediterranean.

Italy's efforts to compete with France in Libya have had a similar effect, resulting in overt Italian backing for groups in western Libya. The rivalry between Italy and France persists, despite the 2021 Quirinale accord, due to the fundamental divergence of their interests in Libya. For Rome, Libya has always been a national foreign policy priority – so, it is disdainful of what it sees as France playing fast and loose with Italian national security. Despite its criticism of the French approach, however, Italy has also adopted a destructive approach to security partnerships, as seen in the €32.6m it has spent since 2017 on the Libyan coastguard – whose units have abused migrants and refugees.

This policy helped strengthen predatory and often criminal local militias at the expense of initiatives to build structural government capacity and sustainable migration partnerships. Although it helped block refugees' attempts to cross the Mediterranean at the time, the policy has come back to haunt Italy. Human rights atrocities carried out by Italian-funded militias are not only embarrassing for Rome but could result in legal action. Worse still, the GNU now seeks to expand the Italian policy into a model for extorting European states without addressing migration issues effectively.

The French and Italian cases illustrate why Europeans have lost influence in Libya since 2011, despite their many high-profile attempts at engagement with the Libyan authorities. Not strategic enough bilaterally yet not cohesive enough to form a powerful policy bloc, Europeans have been unable to compete with regional actors that are more single-minded in their aim for a political transition and face fewer domestic obstacles to their policies. Additionally, the pressing political imperatives behind Europeans' migration and counter-terrorism policies have resulted in expedient solutions and poor vetting of their partners in Libya.

Although there is still space for Europeans to help stabilise Libya, be it in a technical or political capacity, they have yet to articulate how they would achieve this – let alone seize the opportunity to do so. They need to avoid the short-term policies based on perceived security imperatives that have damaged their reputation among Libyans. France's and Italy's self-serving policies have shaped public perceptions of all Europeans. Accordingly, Libyans no longer regard individual European states as reliable partners, despite the amount of funding these countries have poured into development assistance, notably on border management, counter-migration, and counter-terrorism.

The EU's contributions to multilateral capacity building efforts through its missions and some international organisations were insufficient and ineffectual, partly due to disunity between key member states. They neither countered the negative impact of Italian and French ventures in Libya nor matched the financial and political commitments of actors such as Russia, Turkey, Egypt, and the UAE.

While many lower-level contributions to SSR have been funded through European countries' development assistance budgets, these initiatives were often siloed and were broadly undermined by Europe's lack of strategic cohesion. Germany was more successful in its diplomatic approach, notably through the Berlin Process and its attempts to unify Europeans on Libya. This political initiative paved the way for progress on SSR. The JMC, despite its failings, demonstrates that Europeans can have a meaningful role in international security policies when they work together.

Inadequate European strategy and leadership have hampered multilateral mechanisms that could have coordinated security assistance in the long term. Moreover, mechanisms for coordination between European missions remain rudimentary and largely informal, as they are reluctant to share information on security issues. Nevertheless, the situation has improved somewhat recently. During Haftar's offensive on Tripoli, European states produced a joint report on their role in Libya, which was written by heads of missions and which referred to SSR as an issue for cooperation between them and UNSMIL. Shared recognition of the threat the offensive posed to European interests helped break down traditional barriers to information sharing. It prompted European states to take stock of their existing initiatives and limit duplication where possible.

France, Germany, and Italy are finally improving their cooperation on Libya. This could be seen in a joint visit to Libya by their foreign ministers in early 2021. More substantively, France took the lead in the Berlin Process in November 2021, holding a conference in Paris to try to salvage Libya's election. And Italy now seeks to continue developing the process. This has boosted European diplomacy in Libya in ways that should lead to more cohesive European security policies in the country.

Policy recommendations

For Europeans to compete effectively with their geopolitical rivals in Libya, they will need a shared high-level strategy and joint operational principles. Given their limited room for manoeuvre in Libya, they should develop a medium- to long-term plan for security sector assistance. They should begin by establishing a Libyan-owned SSR body, endowing it with some political influence, and supporting its attempts to reorganise Libya's security sector. The aim should be to create an institution that can outlast the country's current political struggles and crises, as well as to support local initiatives and partners who can engage in shorter-term SSR programmes.

Step 1: Shape a coherent European approach

As discussed, the political anxieties and short-termism of European and Libyan leaders remain the primary obstacle to the comprehensive reform of security institutions. Germany, France, and Italy should take the lead in laying out the priorities, boundaries, and operational principles of a shared EU approach to SSR in Libya. Without a unified strategy and policy, Europeans will be unable to end the inertia generated by their rivals in Libya and will squander their greatest assets: the technical expertise and resources of organisations such as NATO and the EU.

A coherent European strategy for SSR could encourage member states such as Spain, the Netherlands, and Denmark to maximise the impact of their support for Libya as part of an EU-wide approach. This effort should begin with an objective needs assessment of Libya's security sector that maps all SSR initiatives in the country. This process would improve the technical support that Europeans provide to Libya and identify areas in which it would be most effective to work bilaterally, in partnerships, or through multilateral institutions. Brussels should implement a coordinated, long-term European plan for Libyan SSR that includes mechanisms for cooperation and knowledge transfer between Europeans.

Identifying and mapping out a European SSR support strategy in this way could also facilitate enhanced multilateral cooperation with key partners such as the UK, the US, and NATO. Russia's growing presence in Libya, close to NATO installations in Sicily, only adds to the urgency of these efforts. The 2003 Berlin Plus arrangement between NATO and the EU creates avenues for joint programming and could enhance organisational and capacity building projects in Libya. NATO has stated that it will provide capacity building support if the Libyan government requests this.

Should Europeans reach a consensus on the scope of SSR cooperation with NATO, this could also help repair the Europe-Turkey relationship in Libya. Working through NATO would diminish Turkey's concerns about being marginalised in Libya, while providing Europeans with a platform on which to reduce Turkish influence on the Libyan security sector. Such cooperation would not induce Ankara to abandon its controversial agreement with the Libyan government on maritime boundaries, but it could help Europeans discourage Turkey from weaponising Libyan politics, gas reserves, or migration to extract concessions from the EU. This could build confidence between Europe and Turkey at a time when their relationship is fraught. It would also reduce the chances of a Turkish-Russian partnership taking control in Libya. Given Russia's growing influence in sub-Saharan Africa, a united front with Turkey could have geopolitical benefits beyond Libya – by helping Europeans regain influence over Russia's expansion in Africa.

Step 2: Empower a Libyan-owned Joint Security Commission

Any credible, practical European strategy for SSR in Libya will require a Libyan vehicle to own and implement the process. Again, recent developments have created opportunities for this. Through UNSMIL, Europe should initiate the establishment of a Joint Security Commission (JSC) as a second phase of the JMC that focuses on SSR, while the JMC nominally continues to handle interim security arrangements. The JSC would have different priorities from the JMC and, to meet the political requirements of SSR, would be under civilian leadership.

The use of JMC branding would associate this new body with UN recognition and avoid some of the bureaucratic challenges of creating an entirely new mechanism, thereby increasing its legitimacy among Libyans and Libya's international partners. As a civilian-led body, the JSC would be more acceptable to the many armed and political forces that fought against Haftar or Qaddafi – which are especially prevalent in western Libya, and which fear a return to military dictatorship. The evolution of the JMC represented by the JSC could also capitalise on the changing views of members of the Libyan security services, many of whom have in the past year rejected division as a means to stabilise Libya and grown increasingly eager to protect their country's sovereignty. By bringing in key commanders as part of its membership, the JSC could formalise assistance for the Haddad-Nathouri initiative and local SSR efforts. The body could gain the recognition and nominal support from Haftar it needs by ensuring that he has representatives among the civilian leadership. To avoid being hijacked as the JMC was, the JSC should combine political representation with technocrats from the

security sector.

Nevertheless, as Haftar and other Libyan political elites could try to undermine the JSC, Europeans should push them not to do so through offers of enhanced partnerships and threats of sanctions against those who spoil the JSC's work. Sustained pressure, close support for the JSC, and attempts to find common cause with other international actors in Libya would be key to the body's success.

The JSC's priority should be to articulate a Libyan-owned vision for SSR that Europeans can support and that has effective oversight mechanisms. To sustain the new body's influence, Europeans should promote inclusive dialogue on the security needs of the Libyan population and consultations with armed groups from the start.

As a next step, Europeans should provide technical assistance to the JSC as it plans how to surmount the main obstacles to SSR. This could be channelled and coordinated through the International Follow-up Committee on Libya. In this setup, the JSC would act as a vehicle for Europeans and Libyans to create mutually beneficial policies on issues where their interests converge, such as the departure of foreign mercenaries. As the JMC already engages with this issue under interim security arrangements, it would be a useful area in which to ensure the two bodies complement each other.

Meanwhile, European technical support could help strengthen the rule of law in ways that protect ordinary Libyans. Libyan elites may not make optimal use of such assistance, but it would contribute to a cultural shift towards sustainable, systematic solutions to security problems.

Another key challenge for the JSC would be planning for the unification of Libya's police and armed forces, which is the first step towards the development of professional security services that could eventually degrade and neutralise the influence of criminal and ideological militias. This process could be important in formulating comprehensive DDR strategies and increasing European support for Libya's security sector. It would allow Europeans to target funding more effectively and address key operational issues – including local capacity to conduct arrest and seizure operations across Libya, which are important to migration and counter-terrorism policy. The professionalisation of the security services would also help Libya create comprehensive security and judicial policies to combat smuggling and process migrants and refugees – making it much easier for European states to implement their own migration policies. Similarly, the reform of Libya's Ministry of Defence would allow Europe to channel significant funds from the European Peace Facility to the country's security sector.

The unification of Libya's police and armed forces will also require operational changes such as the standardisation of rules of engagement across the country. This would enable other Libyan institutions to set up oversight mechanisms for demobilisation and professionalisation in the security sector.

Another promising avenue of SSR involves internationally sponsored initiatives such as the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum and future consensus generating mechanisms and consultative programmes (such as the National Conference Process consultations of 2018). It is important to include security sector personnel in political programmes given armed groups' influence on Libyan politics and policy. On a national scale, most of Libya's armed groups are highly localised in their command structures, interpersonal relationships, and self-perception as guardians of specific communities. It would be wise to consult with them in political discussions to win their support for national SSR policies. This approach would also help the authorities understand armed groups and thereby build more successful DDR programmes. Indeed, a critical mass of support from some armed groups could counteract the obstructive behaviour of criminal, ideological, or politicised militias. To this end, in the lead-up to an election, the JSC should create mechanisms for armed groups to engage with the political process constructively and in ways that can survive a change of government. Some foreign powers have already provided these groups with ways to engage with the political process – including through the creation of new leadership, as well as institutional and local-level initiatives – but more needs to be done to ensure that such efforts fit within a coherent SSR strategy.

Step 3: Deter spoilers

It will be vital for Europeans to deter domestic and international spoilers. This will initially require Europe to build a broad base of international support for its SSR strategy. Egypt, Turkey, and the UAE are all influential among different constituencies in Libya and, after years of competition, are now exploring ways to cooperate with one another. All three have an interest in stabilising Libya, which will require the creation of a functional security service. France, Germany, and Italy should try to persuade them that the European SSR strategy is the only way forward, before giving them responsibility for certain aspects of the strategy to ensure that they are invested in it. Europeans will also need to deter them from using their proxies to sabotage these efforts at reform.

Russia is likely to remain Libya's spoiler-in-chief. Wagner Group, a Russian private military company, uses its Libyan partners to disrupt the political process and unification efforts while exploiting the resulting anarchy to secure military bases and key oil production sites. The firm will likely be difficult

to brush aside. But, by working with or deterring other potential spoilers, Europe could help isolate Russia and limit its capacity to counter the European SSR strategy. This approach should also look to take advantage of many Libyans' resentment of Russian attacks on Libya's sovereignty and political transition. If it becomes possible to develop a partnership with Russia, Europe could use a security working group under the Berlin Process to launch a truly multilateral approach to SSR.

Step 4: Support local SSR initiatives

As discussed, most of Libya's security sector comprises local groups with relatively parochial interests. Europeans should work with partners in local communities on small-scale technical and administrative SSR.

To this end, Europeans should target development assistance funds at local Libyan civil society organisations working in areas such as community safety, including through support for dialogue between local security directorates and local populations. They should also offer financial assistance to civil society groups that provide informal oversight of the security sector – as media outlets do in reporting on the conditions faced by detainees – and that focus on the political empowerment of women and young people, among other areas. Greater local security capacity would help ease current tensions and support longer-term institutional SSR. It would also help facilitate a more open and inclusive political process.

Europeans could bolster their existing security assistance projects – such as their coordination with the JMC and individual units engaged in counter-terrorism and counter-smuggling – by building local capacity to vet and train security personnel. To avoid a repeat of past mistakes, it would be vital to attach conditions to such support that still apply once equipment deliveries have been completed (in areas such as the vetting of trainees, minimum requirements for the duration and thoroughness of training, and job performance). This means retaining the power to abandon programmes that make no positive contribution to SSR before they become outright harmful. Europeans should empower a technocratic and professional leadership in Libya's security sector rather than rely on the country's often-cynical politicians. And they should build relationships with security units responsible for securing key resources such as oil terminals, power plants, and ports. Political elites have frequently used such units to engage in harmful activities such as oil embargoes. By working with the relevant ministries, command structures, and national corporations, Europeans can help implement mechanisms to make these units more professional and resilient.

Conclusion

Libya will need to thoroughly reform its security sector if it is to achieve lasting stability. Given the fragility of the country's political process and the incompetence of its elites, European support for the Libyan security services will be vital in creating an environment conducive to political progress. Nevertheless, as SSR is a fundamentally political exercise, it will only succeed if it is based on a common vision at the Libyan and European levels. At the multilateral level, the development of a successful common vision for SSR in Libya will require coordination and improved integration of work under the three tracks of the UN process.

The UN process in Libya may be faltering, but it has created a fleeting opportunity for reform. Europeans and Libyans have their best chance in years to build lasting security partnerships in areas of mutual interest, such as counter-smuggling, counter-terrorism, and the build-up of foreign forces on Europe's doorstep. The only alternative is to tolerate a cycle of instability that will affect them for years to come.

About the author

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Acknowledgements

Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo

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