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ORDER FROM CHAOS: STABILISING LIBYA THE LOCAL WAY

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SUMMARY

Instability resulting from Libya's revolution and civil war has never fully come under control. It has worsened with political infighting, the failures of the GNA, and the emergence of a rival government in the east of the country.

The inadequacy of the international community's early "light footprint" approach became clear as the unstable elements of this situation fed even greater instability throughout Libya.

The three main components of stabilisation are: ensuring the delivery of public services; stabilising the economy; and providing security. There has been some progress on the first component, but stabilisation actors must now focus on the economy.

Innovation at municipal level and the weakness and corruption of central government mean that international players should look to local authorities as partners for re-establishing public services.

A multiplicity of international actors operate in Libya, with a sometimes surprising level of cohesiveness. Nevertheless, now is the time for them to collectively agree a high-level strategy, ensuring they have a bird's eye view of the efforts they are all making to bring stability back to Libya.

Introduction

The tragedy of Libya in well known in outline but poorly known in detail – to many in Europe, that is. The unrelenting nature of Libya's instability this decade has made itself felt beyond its shores in the form of refugee flows through and out of the country. Europeans go to Libya to seek help with their migration woes, but leave empty-handed when they find no government that can actually govern. The sorry tale of life along this southern Mediterranean shore sometimes filters northwards in the form of news reports about violent acts committed by warring groups.

To Libyans enduring the upheaval in their country after 2011, the detail is known only too well, of course. Revolution, civil war, and rival governments eyeing each other across an often lawless country have plunged Libyans into what sometimes amounts to a daily battle for survival. Their quality of life has deteriorated dramatically. Many people live in pervasive insecurity under militia rule and amid continual conflict. They have suffered failures of electricity, water, and telecommunications, and a general absence of functional governance. Steep inflation in the cost of some basic goods and scarcity in others have meant many Libyans are unable to look after themselves or their families with the dignity and security they deserve. All the while, networks of elites control access to public goods, smugglers contrive to raise prices for desperate buyers, and local militias conspire to lock the Libyan citizenry out of the economic opportunities, public services, and security that it rightly expects.

The route out of this countrywide mess is not straightforward, but there is a way through. Policies and programmes geared towards achieving stabilisation – turning a failed state into a stable state capable of self-governance – have correctly, if belatedly, moved to the centre of international efforts in Libya. At the heart of this approach is the understanding that an environment of prolonged instability can eventually itself become a driver of further conflict and state collapse. Once emergency situations improve, the three main components of stabilisation are to: ensure the delivery of public services; move the economy onto an even keel; and provide security to the population at large.

The worsening political, security, and economic context in Libya has indeed led international actors to put in place measures aiming to stabilise the country. The European Union and its member states have driven this, concerned as they are at the burgeoning problems so close to their own shores. However, in this they have lacked a strong local partner: the ineffectiveness of the Government of National Accord (GNA) set up in 2015 has proved a heavy drag on stabilisation efforts. For, while stabilisation is undoubtedly critical to meeting people's immediate needs, the story so far in Libya has been one of focusing mainly on the first component of an effective stabilisation package, namely: re-establishing basic services and maintaining infrastructure. This has meant that any gains are vulnerable to renewed strife. And the only partial successes made here have played into widespread popular disengagement from national politics. On top of this, the lucrative nature of the status quo for the current elite is a powerful incentive for its members to stall attempts at change.

This paper will show that the international community should double down on three core areas in order to restore stability to Libya. The first is to rescue and radically improve Libya's ravaged, conflict-torn economy. Without raising ordinary Libyans' economic prospects, it will be difficult to embed the partial improvements already made in re-establishing public services, strengthen their faith in the political process, or move to a situation where security improves. Changing how the economy works will be difficult because of the way in which the new Libyan elite exploits existing socioeconomic structures for its own personal gain. But addressing Libya's structural macroeconomic flaws is a prerequisite to stabilising the country.

Second, current efforts must expand to encompass more effective partners than the GNA, such as municipalities and state-owned companies. These will not only outlive the GNA but are also more relevant to and engaged with their constituencies. Numerous local authorities have already rightly won praise for improving their local economic situation and bringing the forces of law and order under civilian control.

The international community should look to these bright spots and seek to understand how they can encourage local government across Libya to follow these examples. European countries and aid agencies should allocate their funding to support such efforts and spread best practice.

Finally, international players should carry out a concerted exercise in high-level strategising in order to improve the effectiveness of these efforts across the piece. The 'bird's eye view' they obtain from this work will allow them to eliminate any duplication of effort they uncover and ensure they never work at cross-purposes to each other. Together they need to be sure that the parts at least equal the whole, if not exceed it.

It is possible to halt and reverse the vicious cycle of destabilisation in which Libya finds itself. Indeed, in future, it will be possible to turn this into a virtuous one, locking in gains made through the ongoing process of stabilisation. The difficult matter of improving and maintaining security – the third vital component – largely lies beyond the scope of this paper. But ensuring that Libyans have a safe environment to live in will become more feasible if players in Libya address the economy component, thereby using future gains as a platform for even deeper stabilisation policies. Eventually this more constructive cycle will not only more effectively and durably stabilise Libya, it will also create the foundations for a future, Libyan-owned state-building process.

Governed by a lame duck

The political structure bequeathed by Colonel Gaddafi was one which lacked decision-making structures and legal foundation but which centralised oil revenue and its distribution. This naturally represented a seductive prize and made zero-sum conflict after the revolution a virtual inevitability. Political power in Libya is invested unaccountably in whomever controls this centralised fund of money and the means to distribute it.

The formation of the General National Congress (GNC) in 2012 was an attempt to force the groups of the revolution into an inclusive decision-making mechanism to sit atop this inherited structure. These factions can be crudely delineated into: hardcore revolutionaries (self-defined along geographic or social lines), who believed their role in the revolution gave them the right to political power; those persecuted by the regime, including some Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, who pursued revenge against all those associated with the previous regime; other Islamist groups, who wanted religion to play a larger political role; and a cadre of technocrats and professionals, who previously failed to reform the Gaddafi regime and saw an opportunity to build the Libya they had long envisaged. Through the GNC, ministerial and other institutional appointments were wholly politicised as each faction tried to maximise its number of ministries, and thereby the share of state funds, under their control.

Libya's slide into failed state status began in June 2014, when hostilities erupted between rival political factions on a national scale in the wake of the election for a new parliament, the House of Representatives, to replace the failed GNC. Amid this political collapse, a trigger for the increase in hostilities was the movement of Khalifa Haftar, who rallied a small group of former army officers near Benghazi to fight back against the plague of assassinations, attributed to those Islamists seeking revenge against the system which had persecuted them, which had paralysed the city. An already precarious situation deteriorated further in November of that year when the Tripoli-based Supreme Court ruled that the newly elected House of Representatives was an illegal legislature. This led the central bank to refuse to finance it. As a result, the House of Representatives founded its own government and central bank based in the east of the country, claiming authority over territories supporting at first the House of Representatives and later Khalifa Haftar and his 'Dignity' movement, which became increasingly political.

Libya had become burdened with a split in the institutions that were supposed to be governing it. Conflict spread across the country in reflection of this split. Meanwhile, local groups took advantage of the centre's weakness and moved in to secure profit and advancement for themselves at the expense of the wider common good. An oil blockade organised by internal groups caused a fall in exports, harming the country's finances. The consequence of all this was a cataclysmic local loss of confidence in the economy and the state's ability to provide for its citizens.

In an attempt to bring back a single functioning national government, in December 2015 the United Nations pre-emptively authorised an unfinished political unification agreement between Libya's factions known as the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), which resulted in the creation of the GNA under a new prime minister, Fayez al-Serraj. The aim of this agreement was to prevent the destructive cycle set off by the civil war from becoming unstoppable. A consensus government was to assume authority nationwide and start reconstructing the Libyan state while allowing the House of Representatives to complete the transition to constitutionalism.

It is true that Libya is something of a patchwork of localities and regions with strong political identities that reasserted themselves in the post-Gaddafi era. This may always have made it hard to establish an effective central government with reach right across the country. Nevertheless, even a government still imbued with the patronage culture of the previous regime may still have provided a vehicle of sorts through which to resolve the crisis. But, even after the international community decided to get more closely involved trying to stabilise Libya, it found the GNA a poor partner for achieving this.

Just as the LPA proved itself an evolution of, rather than the answer to, Libya's political problems so too the GNA aggravated, rather than, calmed, Libya's destructive cycle. Despite assuming power in Tripoli in March 2016, the GNA never won the approval of the House of Representatives, which to this day maintains its own government and set of institutions. Amending the LPA in a manner that satisfies all parties involved has proved impossible. In May 2018, UN Special Representative Ghassan Salamé announced that he had formally given up on amending the LPA, which had been the first step of his action plan, and that he was now focusing his efforts on the plan's last step – elections by the end of this year. This marks a new direction for the internationally led political process, which aims to achieve what the

LPA did not.

Despite its establishment two and a half years ago, the GNA has comprehensively failed to generate local support, proactively attempt to govern, or implement policies it has not been provided with or coerced into by international players or local power-holders like militias. Moreover, it is worryingly beholden to the militias of Tripoli, which have inserted their own people into the government at a sub-ministerial level. They increasingly dictate the GNA's actions and have turned a small group of players into the main beneficiaries of state funding. The sole remaining source of legitimacy it enjoys is its international support, which puts international actors in an awkward position. On top of this, the GNA's lame duck status following the announcement of future elections, and its proven inability to use its ministries to institute fresh policies rather than merely maintain the status quo, make it a wholly incapable partner for pursuing stabilisation objectives.

Enter the SFL

After the revolution, the international community originally pursued a "light footprint" approach in Libya. This limited outside involvement to responding to official requests from the Libyan authorities, such as those for assistance in organising elections. The approach effectively relegated the international community to bystanders and, as a result, Libya's first attempts at democratic governance saw it founder and then collapse completely.

But once international actors set about pursuing a different approach, they settled on establishing what became known as the Stabilisation Facility for Libya (SFL) in 2016. This marked a clear reversal of the reactive light footprint approach. This new vehicle was to enable international institutions to identify solutions to some of Libya's structural issues and work with partners of their own choosing. And, crucially, the GNA was to be a core partner in this new way of working for stability.

As a multilateral initiative between 12 governments, the UN, and the GNA, the purpose of the SFL is to channel international expertise through the GNA and strengthen the its capacity to respond to these challenges and re-establish public services, stabilise the economy on national and local levels, and provide security – the three tenets of stabilisation. This was to be a joint effort: the board was co-chaired by the GNA's minister of planning and the UN deputy special representative. But it has ended up being an internationally led affair. The GNA only recently made its first contribution to the stabilisation fund, which was initially devised as a complementary scheme in which international partners would match Libyan contributions. However, to the frustration of their counterparts, the GNA has also failed to take up its co-leadership role in providing strategic oversight, identifying stabilisation priorities, and developing a national or long-term plan that would give greater cohesion to stabilisation efforts.

That said, the establishment of the SFL represented a turning point whereby the international community assumed a more hands-on approach, proactively attempting to arrest Libya's vicious cycle of deteriorating stability and lay the foundations on which the future state will be built. However, the deployment of stabilisation measures to date has largely consisted of disjointedly restoring some services without a wider vision for how to build capacity in Libya for longer-term reform and state-building. As a result, stabilisation efforts risk amounting to nothing more than an expensive life-support machine for the Libyan state.

All this is despite the fact that the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) provided a stabilisation delivery adviser to the prime minister. The difficulties of international cooperation with the national-level state apparatus are evident at the ministry level, where Gaddafi-era patronage culture still pervades national ministries. Libya's historical position as an aid donor rather than a recipient country has further left government departments incapable of developing proposals of their own or of following through on those initiated by international actors. The difficulties of cooperation and a lack of a Libyan-supplied vision blunt the overall efficacy and durability of international efforts and create an environment in which even experienced institutions like the UNDP struggle to make progress. The GNA's shortcomings have led the UNDP to make use of SFL funds and take on the responsibilities of conducting needs assessments, prioritising issues and partners, and carrying out stabilisation programmes.

The emergency assistance and the recovery and resilience programmes which each followed operate largely independently of the GNA and have proved effective at slowing the dilapidation of Libyan service delivery, helping restore some normality to Libyans' lives. The emergency assistance programme supported some of the hardest-hit yet most vital service areas, repairing hospital facilities and providing them with solar panels to allow them to operate amid ever-lengthier power cuts, rebuilding schools, and supplying crucial equipment such as ambulances and fire and garbage trucks.

In 2017 the UNDP began the next stage of its stabilisation work: the three-year recovery and resilience initiative. This targeted six municipalities across Libya with the aim of building capacity to return services to operation, stimulate local economic recovery, and provide community security and, through it, local stability. The first step in these efforts focused on supporting local institutions to provide sustainable access to education, healthcare, water, sanitation, and electricity. The second focused on creating new sustainable jobs and stable sources of income, and on integrating internally displaced persons and returnees. The third, and arguably the most difficult in the present environment, seeks to help Libyan communities strengthen and reinstate institutions that underpin the rule of law.

These are welcome moves in a country which has seen little success in stabilisation. Where possible, these programmes should continue to expand to cover more municipalities. Libyan stabilisation programmes have evolved from their original role of providing emergency assistance to maintain vital services like healthcare or education in the wake of war, to more long-term and durable programmes of building the capacity of local actors to re-establish and maintain services, or to directly intervene to repair infrastructure.

Next stop: the economy

As noted above, an improved economic situation is essential to stabilising Libya. Three main issues comprise the economic aspect of instability in Libya: the liquidity crisis, the lack of imports driving price inflation across many products, and the smuggling of subsidised goods. These phenomena are underpinned by a patronage-based system that gives current elites little incentive to carry out reform. The poor security situation also harms the wider stabilisation effort: one of the causes of a bank run in 2014 was the environment of pervasive criminality in which militias robbed banks or worked with their staff to access the account details of prospective kidnapping targets. Banks began limiting withdrawals to between 200 and 500 dinars per account. Today Libyans struggle to access their own money and meet their needs; the long lines of frustrated and despairing citizens waiting for days outside banks are an ever-present advertisement of this problem. Militias and other well-connected individuals prey on these people, offering them a fraction of their account's value in return for immediate access to their ability to circumvent the system and provide hard currency.

In addition, Libya imports 85 percent of what it needs. The current discrepancy between the official exchange rate of the Libyan dinar (1.4 LD to the US dollar) and a black market exchange rate (of between 6 to 10 LD to the US dollar), has encouraged import fraud. Importers and those with connections in banks or the central bank are able to engage in this manipulation. As a result, just 14 percent of declared imports reach Libya's markets: importers convert the credit provided to them by the central bank into hard foreign currency to be sold on the Libyan black market.[1] This has created a scarcity of goods and correspondingly triggered steep inflation, which makes the cost of living virtually unaffordable for most Libyans. This scarcity has even extended into what were once the subsidised and price-controlled staples of everyday life such as petrol, gas, and bread as militias and other criminal groups continue to hijack the state's distribution channels. By concentrating this cheap access to such high-demand goods in their own hands they have gained the ability to either smuggle the goods abroad to sell at global market prices or levy a high mark-up on sales to Libyans in desperate need of these goods. Hijacking and smuggling subsidised goods exacerbates the hardships of scarcity and price-inflation that many Libyans suffer from, while creating a lucrative new revenue stream from which militias and other criminal entities profit and which further entrenches their power.

The intensity with which these issues affect Libyans means that the most promising path to reversing Libya's failed state status is a wider stabilisation strategy encompassing such issues, along with restoring services and building the capacity of partners who can effectively manage these services in the long term. A more effective stabilisation approach for the future should therefore more concertedly seek to address liquidity, inflation, and smuggling. The lack of faith in the banking system combined with these three pressures has denuded the Libyan economy and encouraged a burgeoning cash economy operating largely outside of regulatory control. The growing liquidity crisis was accompanied by rapid inflation that only further encouraged Libyans' desperate attempts to preserve their savings by converting bank deposits into assets or foreign currency. By 2016 over half of the 42 billion dinars in existence were circulating in the popularly dubbed "shadow economy". Although the available solutions to these problems are incomplete, European and other stabilisation actors are well placed to take them forward. And, while solutions to the security crisis are largely outside the current preserve of stabilisation, the political and economic structures propping up the current elite and generating so much resistance to change is something that stabilisation actors can address immediately.

The economy strand of stabilisation efforts urgently needs strengthening, even if international actors have already tried to make inroads in this area. For example, the economic recovery section of the UNDP programme has focused on helping Libyans move into private sector roles. This worked at the local level rather than through national-level structures. In Benghazi the programme has supported the Tatweer organisation, developed by local citizens to provide IT training, programmes to encourage tech start-ups, and an incubator to help entrepreneurs develop. In Tripoli it has worked with Toyota in organising a three-month sponsored training programme covering vocational and academic disciplines. Given the public-private sector imbalance in Libya, the correct track to long-term economic development is to encourage both Libyan entrepreneurship and training programmes to reskill workers. Moreover, by separating these programmes from the Libyan public sector, with its problematic institutionalised working culture and its status as a target for Libyan militias and political factions to fight over, these programmes are more resilient as they are insulated from involvement in Libya's current conflict.

Despite inadequate support from the GNA as a partner, there have been attempts to move stabilisation on from emergency aid towards tackling some of the structural issues and devising strategies for the long term. The UNDP has worked on a framework to lay the foundations for long-term change along with short-term fire-fighting. Using the Sustainable Development Goals agreed by the UN in 2015, it focuses on restoring service delivery and capacity-building institutions of governance, with an overall emphasis on economic stabilisation. As a leading SFL actor it also liaises with the stabilisation initiatives of the 12 other contributor countries that run programmes concurrent to the UNDP. Although there are regular coordination meetings, and there is a surprising level of cohesiveness to the simultaneous operations of such a large number of individual states, there is room to make the overall process more effective.

Nevertheless, in an example of the benefits of a multilateral approach, different partners have qualities suited to each problem. For example, the United States, the United Kingdom, and others have exerted consistent diplomatic pressure to encourage a reform programme between the central bank, the Ministry of Finance, and the Presidency Council in an attempt to tackle economic issues. Following a series of dialogues that included Western diplomats, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and key Libyan financial actors, the central bank governor announced in early June 2018 that reforms had been agreed, including on the key subsidies and exchange rate issues that lie behind much of Libya's economic instability. However, Libyan authorities have spoken about such reforms without following through. This time around, the country needs continued engagement along this path. There is reason to fear that these reforms are not being targeted correctly. Without associated measures to restore confidence in banks or ensure that Libya's imports satisfy demand, the market forces that created inflation and devaluation will simply adjust accordingly.

Addressing Libya's macroeconomic structural flaws collectively benefits Libya's citizenry and remains the best avenue for reversing the current public atmosphere of despair. Doing so could also bolster public engagement with the political process. A stronger focus on the economy by stabilisation actors would also be politically effective, as it could also help undercut the economic incentives Libya's political actors have for protecting the status quo. A strengthened economy would provide a second pillar in the effort to build a stabilised Libya.

The future is local

Any long-term stabilisation plan cannot be successful without the involvement of the national government, but there are also other avenues for engagement. Indeed, this may even be especially important in Libya. The country's long history as a loose association of strong localities, allied with the aversion to a strong central state following 42 years of dictatorship, has created a popular urge to formalise devolved governance and powers. And, as the central state has receded into irrelevance in the lives of many ordinary people, local municipalities have correspondingly risen in prominence to become the new face of Libyan governance and the most common partner that stabilisation actors ally with. Although there is still a long way to go in this respect, in 2013 a new municipalities law issued by the then transitional government created fresh municipalities and provided for democratic local authorities which could use the provisions available in law such as municipal revenue generation.

Since their election in 2014, some of these local authorities have proved adept at delivering services and overcoming national-level issues, such as militia-dominated security sectors, a lack of financing from the central state, and shortfalls in government accountability and transparency. Despite being unable to fulfil the functions of a national government, their inevitable central role in any future Libyan state means they represent the best current institutional partner for channelling international stabilisation efforts. As such, municipalities have gradually become the focus of international efforts to re-establish public services, and maintain and repair infrastructure. Likewise, current realities have caused high-level stabilisation policy to begin shifting away from building the capacity of the GNA. The focus is now moving towards issues that are vital to the functioning of the next government, such as unifying the central bank of Libya and its newer eastern counterpart.

Libya's journey towards a decentralised system of government makes engagement with municipal actors a worthwhile long-term investment. Although their success has not been uniform, their elected nature and strong social ties have granted some of them a level of legitimacy beyond that of any national-level actor. A few have developed creative solutions to common problems that other municipalities could adopt or that could even be scaled up to the national level. For example, the Zuwaran municipality has built strong ties with local media outlets including radio stations and magazines in order to increase its engagement with citizens. This has led to greater accountability and more responsive governance. Municipalities like Misrata have addressed their security problem by creating a 'super militia' of local militias under the municipality's supervision while towns like Zliten have created security coordination centres to obtain the same benefit for themselves.[2] In at least some contexts, militias under local, respected, and civilian leadership can constrain the negative excesses that other militias indulge in while also providing security. Moreover, many have resurrected traditional dispute resolution mechanisms such as councils of elders to keep the peace in the absence of a functioning court system.

Other local authorities have developed taxation systems with local businesses to keep themselves solvent and able to govern despite their budgets often going unfunded by the central government. Similarly, Libya's state-owned companies such as GECOL or LPTIC, which manage the country's electrical and communications grids respectively, remain engaged in trying to maintain their infrastructure and deliver their service despite inadequate GNA assistance. As with the municipalities, their continuing functionality makes them a viable partner for stabilisation programmes related to the areas they have competency in. The fact that the municipalities will outlive the GNA and be able to support future governments by delivering the services they are responsible for means such partnership investment in capacity-building will pay long-term dividends.

Ministry figures and some international observers mount a counter-argument to this position, which advises against focusing on the municipal level. They contend that ignoring central ministries and instead focusing on select municipalities – thereby boosting their autonomy – indirectly speeds the fragmentation of the country. There is some element of risk in this approach, given that laws on local governance are still incomplete. However, there is a seemingly irrepressible trend in Libya towards the local, and deep structural reform of the centre is simply not possible in the current environment. These differences are also overshadowed by the need for a functional partner to deliver stabilisation where and when possible, especially in some of the most troubled areas of the country, in order to avoid a complete collapse in quality of life. It is equally worth noting that, although many municipalities have proved to be inventive, proactive, and representative, many are simply miniaturisations of national-level institutions that wallow in corruption and clientelism, exhibiting the worst traits of Libya's patronage-based political culture. This argument ignores the fact that a successful stabilisation strategy will have to incorporate municipalities rather than treat them as a homogenous unit capable of picking up the slack left by the GNA. A systematic approach to rolling out resilient service delivery structures and governance mechanisms would not encourage fragmentation but instead ensure that each part of the future governance system of Libya is developing. Modelling what has been successful in some municipalities is the easiest path towards spreading that success at the local level, which in turn will provide a stable base for ministerial-level reform when the environment allows for it.

European countries potentially have a big role to play here. Given their experiences in reforming the governance and economic mechanisms of former Soviet bloc countries, the EU and some member states would be natural lead partners for such an endeavour. Indeed, they could build on experience-sharing programmes, such as the Nicosia Initiative organised by the European Committee of the Regions, which partners Libyan municipalities with European ones in an experience- and expertise-sharing programme. Furthermore, akin to the UNDP programme with Toyota, European companies in different industries, such as oil, logistics, technology, and engineering, could take part in similar development programmes. This would provide the further benefit of diversifying training while strengthening Libya's still-fragile private sector.

As part of the continuing development and expansion of its programmes, in 2017 the UNDP initiated a recovery and resilience programme to strengthen the capacity of Libyan municipalities to "restore security, essential services delivery, and livelihoods opportunity." As noted, this almost entirely EU-funded project focuses on six municipalities across the country and covers three areas of assistance: service delivery, economic recovery, and community security. If this is indeed to be the three-headed realisation of the next phase of stabilisation policy in Libya, each component of the programme's work to date can provide lessons.

On the service delivery front, the UNDP has worked with local municipalities in conducting a needs assessment and identifying local priorities such as renovating clinics, road rehabilitation, and maintaining and reopening parks. It has also helped resolve larger infrastructure issues such as repairing a sewage discharge pipeline in Sebha that would flood the streets each time it rained. Although these are undoubtedly important projects in stabilising quality of life and providing Libyans with some optimism about future development, they are more about recovery than about resilience. The six municipalities participating were likely chosen for their mixture of political importance and their presence as fronts in Libya's internecine civil war. In a grim reminder of the constraints that these types of projects are under, there is little to stop the benefits of this work being reversed if national-level political and security issues are not resolved. This reinforces the argument that stabilisation cannot be a standalone policy. EU member states with strong diplomatic involvement in Libya must ensure stabilisation successes dovetail with progress in preventing conflict and bridging the political divide.

A bird's eye view

A wide variety of organisations are engaged in attempts to stabilise Libya. The establishment of the SFL and the two-stage work of the UNDP in the form of its initial emergency assistance programme and recovery and resilience programme have seen some success, particularly in helping stabilise some service delivery, as well as in making some progress in strengthening the capacity of local authorities and taking some economic projects forward.

The successes that the UNDP has already had in working with local government have centred on emergency assistance in which it provided resources such as ambulances, fire and garbage trucks, and school computers, and fitted generators and solar panels to schools and hospitals in order to increase their resilience to disruptions in Libya's electricity supply. Individual states have followed suit in maintaining key areas of service delivery, such as Italy's recent commitment to finance the restoration of Tripoli's garbage collection service following the emergence of a noticeable problem of waste on the streets.

But, despite the success of these policies in maintaining key services, they have been delivered in piecemeal fashion rather than holistically. Future plans will need to translate the provision of services into a Libyan capacity to sustainably take on such provision. Europeans involved in stabilisation, both governmental and those of state-sponsored agencies and NGOs, have suggested that they would like more expansive information-sharing from UNDP on its programmatic planning to help them identify whether to advance unilateral assistance programmes or opportunities for enhanced cooperation. As the UNDP, various NGOs, and state-sponsored outfits such as Germany's GIZ or Italy's AICS take on enlarged stabilisation roles and long-term projects, all parties will have to increase their information-sharing and qualitative cooperation to ensure that their programmes are complementary.

Individual states have also unilaterally engaged with various Libyan institutions in attempts to build up their effectiveness and improve their functionality in line with their national interests and expertise. For example, the US has embarked on security assistance programmes, such as helping the Ministry of Justice improve policing and prisons. This is an important part of Libya's stabilisation portfolio, given the importance of improving security. Indeed, the third important component of stabilisation – security – will be vital for completing the transition to stability. To date, Libya continues to see militias exploiting the country's structural politico-economic flaws for their own benefit. The UNDP and other more traditional stabilisation actors are not well equipped to meaningfully engage with these groups. The US and the EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya have aimed to provide multilateral assistance on enhancing airport and border security through the Ministry of Interior, and other border units have also been the target of multilateral assistance policies. However, the security landscape in Libya, in which informal militias, whether criminal or ideologically driven, dominate security provision and run detention centres and airports, this is a risky programme that is likely to accrue more negative than positive results.

Alongside this, a persistent concern of the UNDP is that the presence multiple actors engaged in Libya heightens the risk of duplication of effort or even working counter to one another. This risk only grows as the full scale of the support that Libya needs becomes increasingly apparent and more organisations join the effort. The size of the task and the array of tools and differently qualified supporting actors mean that Libya would benefit from high-level strategising to create the most efficient and effective approach possible. In the absence of leadership from the Libyan state, the international actors most heavily invested in stabilisation – the UNDP, the EU, and Germany – should formulate a medium-term approach. Such a bird's eye view would incorporate the lessons outlined in this paper, identifying which municipalities are best suited for partnering with to help return services to operation, considering both the urgency of their needs and their capacity to make sustainable gains. It should also analyse the grassroots initiatives some municipalities have already developed, looking at where they have succeeded and what elements of their initiatives can be modelled for deployment elsewhere. It should pay special attention to the economic component of stabilisation, and address the security component noted above.

International actors involved in stabilisation activities in Libya regularly express dissatisfaction with the communication mechanisms currently in place between them. An honest conversation with one another will help them understand what they need from one another and how best to upgrade communication and coordination mechanisms to share information. This will involve a conscious linkage of stabilisation to Libya's politics, and an awareness that stabilisation cannot exist in a vacuum. Such a linkage makes it easier to pinpoint where specific stabilisation programmes, such as those to resolve economic failings, require diplomatic assistance to truly make progress. As Libya moves towards elections along a new political trajectory mapped out by Salamé, high-level strategising and coordination will become a prerequisite of success.

Next steps for Libya

Libya needs a wider stabilisation strategy than is currently in place. This renewed strategy should aim to create a virtuous cycle by locking in gains made in governance and service delivery, enabling economic recovery, and assisting a move towards greater security and more meaningful and effective political processes. The ineffectual GNA and corrupt legacy of the Gaddafi years mean that the best way to achieve this comes from local actors, be they municipalities, state-owned companies, or private sector initiatives. This wider strategy will need to be responsive to the structural economic flaws of the Libyan state which hamper stabilisation and encourage destructive, destabilising politics.

To ensure the long-term success of the tripartite UNDP recovery and resilience programme, stabilisation actors with sufficient diplomatic gravity will have to make parallel efforts to find a solution to the national-level economic issues that make the status quo so profitable for Libya's elite. Looking further ahead, political unification and an eventual new government will allow these actors to develop new, more meaningful, partnerships with ministers and ministries. This will allow them to remove the current blocks on further progress at the municipal level.

Alongside this, stabilisation actors can do more to develop Libyan municipal capabilities to provide services and encourage economic development at a local level. One way to do this would be for the EU to further increase its support to the UNDP to help extend its resilience work and thereby assist relatively successful municipalities. Some municipalities have leveraged local factors to provide effective governance across the spectrum of the UNDP's local authorities programme, thereby protecting their gains. Learning from the successes of other Libyan municipalities and transferring good practice is likely the easiest path to allowing internationally led stabilisation efforts to naturally evolve into Libyan-led state-building.

At the heart of new high-level strategising by international actors should be the search for municipally developed solutions that are transferrable rather than context-specific and that help each municipality make its own working practices more resilient. This would allow for a model of effective local governance to develop organically while enhancing stability at a local level. Replicating such policies and programmes across municipalities also provides a good platform for linking stabilisation efforts, making them more cohesive. If stabilisation efforts can grow to become more targeted on the most relevant political economy issues and successfully lessen their deleterious effect on the public, they have the potential to not only keep the peace, but also to reduce public cynicism about national politics and generate space and support for the UN-led political process.

Given the rising number of actors playing stabilisation roles, and the different expertise and skillsets they provide, more joint planning and information-sharing will help ensure a complementary approach and lessen the waste of overlapping programmes. A fresh strategy and multilateral approach along these lines remains the best hope for halting Libya's destructive cycle of instability and encouraging the country to move down the long road of the post-revolutionary state-building process.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Libyan Audit Bureau Report (2016), p.131

[2] Romanet-Perroux, J. et al. (July 2017), *Libyan local governance case studies*, European Union Delegation to Libya p.7

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