

Libya two years on: the perspective from Europe

Dr Berny Sèbe



As Libya's first economic partner, and one of its major political backers on the international scene, Europe has high stakes in Tripoli. Though other Arab countries and Turkey are forces to be reckoned with in Libya, for cultural and linguistic reasons, the current transitional authorities owe a lot to European countries – and the latter risk a lot there, too.

Although Germany abstained on the crucial day of 17 March 2011, UN resolution 1973 was tabled under the joint initiative of France and the United Kingdom, and three EU members were among the ten UN Security Council members who voted in favour of it, allowing fighter jets to start pounding Qaddafi's positions within hours. Militarily, EU countries provided vital support to the rebel groups who rose against the country's dictator of 42 years.

Two years on, major disasters have been averted. Elections took place last July, and a coalition of moderates under the leadership of Mahmoud Jibril outdistanced Islamist rivals. Oil installations are up and running again, and trade is blossoming, boosted by the reconstruction needs of a country wrecked by months of civil war. Above all, the balkanisation of the country seems to have been thwarted.

Yet, Mohamed al Magariaf, the President of the Libyan General National Congress, the highest political authority in the country, recently faced two assassination attempts in two months. An armed group also attacked the headquarters of a reputedly moderate TV channel close to Mahmoud Jibril, Alassema TV, abducting its boss alongside four journalists. More generally, governmental control over the vast and open expanses of southern Libya is reportedly weak, giving rise to fears that terrorist groups recently expelled from northern Mali (where they had gained strength as a result of Qaddafi's fall) might wish to relocate their drug trafficking, hostage business and jihadist activities in Libya instead.

Faced with this volatile situation, Europe needs to concentrate its efforts on helping Libya develop a functioning democratic system, rebuild its economy to its full potential, and restore an effective and united state able to cooperate closely on the issues of illegal immigration and global terrorism. European support to the country has been quite rightly organised around these three pillars.

The EU recently announced that its priorities in Libya were centred around supporting the political transition, in particular through providing help for elections and upholding the role of civil society in the hazardous transitional period (especially through the 'European Endowment for Democracy'). An Election Assessment Team was sent to Libya on the occasion of the elections of July 2012. Libya still has to agree upon a constitution, and Europe wishes to ensure that internal political polarization between secular and Islamist forces does not grind the country to a halt. Minorities, or more vulnerable groups such as women, also need to be specifically protected in the new Libyan political arena.

Europe also needs to support Libya in its economic transition, since Qaddafi's fall presented a risk of real economic collapse, with EU access to vital raw resources potentially curtailed. This is all the more strategically significant since the EU is Libya's largest trading partner, with between 35 and 40% of Libya's imports originating from EU countries, and nearly 70% of Libya's exports going to the EU. Libya is ranked 12th among fuel providers to EU countries.

Last but not least, EU countries need a strong and effective Libyan state, able to impose its rule on the entirety of its territory. It is a pre-requisite to the successful implementation of the closer cooperation and regional integration supported by the European Neighbourhood Policy, of which Libya is a key partner.

EU-Libya cooperation in the area of security will be decisive for the safety of EU countries. The EU has recently approved the principle of a Common Security and Defence Policy mission to support border management in Libya: effective control of land, sea and air borders is key for this partner in the management of migration flows.

The fate of stockpiles of Qaddafi-era weapons needs to be closely scrutinized. Terrorism could still become a major issue in Libya. As dreadful as it may sound, some no-go zones in southern Libya could become safe havens for Jihadist groups, and the process of disintegration of the state in some parts of the country needs to be halted at all costs. The In Amenas hostage crisis in the Algerian Sahara, which threatened directly British interests, has surely been made easier by logistical support bases and young recruits from the South of the country. European countries need to ensure that these networks do not turn some areas of Libya into new powder kegs.

Such a multi-faceted action plan may sound overly ambitious at a time of budgetary restrictions all around Europe, but it is the price to pay if we want to ensure the ultimate success of the Libyan revolution, which major European countries supported. From a purely geostrategical perspective, a stable, prosperous and democratic Libya is desirable not only for Libyans but also their neighbours on the northern shores of the Mediterranean.

Berny Sèbe is a Lecturer in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies, Department of Modern Languages, University of Birmingham.