



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات  
ALJAZEERA CENTRE FOR STUDIES

## Report

### **Libya's New Action Plan: A Recipe for Success?**

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**Salame has already succeeded in getting the international community solidly behind him and has presenting himself as a more even-handed mediator than his predecessors. [Getty Images]**

## Introduction

The post of United Nations (UN) Special Representative to Libya is arguably one of the most unenviable diplomatic positions anywhere in the world right now. Not only are Libya's warring factions still battling it out in a landscape that gets more fragmented and complex by the day, the UN-led peace process, which began in earnest in January 2015, has been hampered by scandal and repeated accusations of bias. Many Libyans, understandably, are left feeling deeply distrustful, viewing the process as yet another ill-thought through attempt by external forces to impose a solution on the country.<sup>(1)</sup>

Ghassan Salame, who took up the job in August 2017, therefore, has a near impossible mission ahead of him. However, the former Lebanese Culture Minister and prominent intellectual is well-placed to take on the role. He has extensive experience in the UN, including as senior advisor to its Secretary General, and is affiliated to a string of high-profile conflict-resolution initiatives and organisations. Unlike his two most recent predecessors, he is also from the region, prompting some analysts to argue that he is better placed to comprehend the "Libyan temperament", as well as the "intertwined relations of the wider region".<sup>(2)</sup>

Salame's arrival in the post has raised high hopes inside Libya and beyond, therefore, that he may be able to work miracles where others have failed.

## Salame's Action Plan

On 20 September 2017, Salame presented his three-stage action plan. The first stage, which has already begun, entails the conflicting parties returning to the negotiating table

to agree on a series of amendments to the Libyan Political Agreement, which was signed in December 2015, but never ratified by the House of Representatives (parliament).

This agreement was problematic from the start. This is hardly surprising as it was forced clumsily and hurriedly through by the international community, which was desperate at the time to establish a consensus government that could serve as a vehicle to endorse military intervention in the war against the Islamic State (IS) in Sirte.<sup>(3)</sup> Such was the push to just get a deal agreed that many of the issues that sit at the heart of the Libyan conflict were either fudged or left out of the agreement altogether. In addition, many of the key players on the ground refused the agreement from the outset as it did not meet their objectives.

The first part of Salame's roadmap, therefore, addresses one of the key failings in this process and, as has been widely acknowledged by both sides in the conflict, is an essential step to moving things forward.

The second stage of the plan, which kicks in once the amendments have been agreed on, is the convening of a National Conference under the auspices of the UN. Although Salame revealed few details about this conference and its mechanisms, it is intended to serve as a launch pad for national reconciliation. As he explained, "Such a Conference is intended to open the door to those ostracized, those self-marginalized, those players who have been reluctant to join the political process. This would be the epitome moment of their National Reconciliation."<sup>(4)</sup>

This conference is a welcome acknowledgement of the fact that Libya's UN-backed peace process has always been far too narrow in scope. Those involved in the core negotiations are hardly representative of their respective institutions, let alone the country as a whole. The proposed conference also marks an important recognition of the fact that there are whole areas and tribes associated with the former regime that have not only been ignored by this process, but left feeling punished for the past. Indeed, much like the current conflict itself, until now this peace process has been a negotiation between the winners of the 2011 revolution only.

Thus, while the bringing in of figures and areas associated with the former regime is likely to be highly contentious and could provoke a backlash among some elements on the ground, it is essential if the country is to ever achieve comprehensive peace.

As for stage three of the action plan, it entails the holding of presidential and parliamentary elections, as well as a referendum on the constitution, the draft of which was completed by the Constituent Assembly in July 2017 but that has yet to be approved by the House of Representatives. Again, this is an essential step for Libya

although it is likely to prove a minefield given the ongoing disagreements over some of the content of the draft.

According to the plan, the process should be completed within one year, with the elections and referendum marking the end of Libya's long and wearisome transition process.

### **Ambitious Goals**

While certainly a welcome chance to turn a new page, this action plan is clearly very ambitious, its timeframe even more so. Salame's assertion that the roadmap could serve as a "qualitative leap towards a capable, stable and dignified state" is a very bold statement indeed.

However, Salame has got off to a good start. He has already succeeded in getting the international community solidly behind him. This is no mean feat given that the international community's approach to post-Gaddafi Libya has been characterised by division and confusion, with European as well as regional states pulling in different directions.

More importantly, Salame has succeeded in presenting himself as a more even-handed mediator than his predecessors. His efforts to engage the east of Libya, and Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, the head of the Libyan National Army whose refusal to come on board has been the greatest sticking point in the process to date, has resulted in a new willingness on the part of the eastern authorities to engage with the process more positively.

Salame has been shrewd enough not to alienate the other side either. This doesn't mean that there aren't serious concerns among certain players and forces in western Libya about his neutrality. For some in the west of the country, Salame is far too closely aligned with France, which has always been more explicit in its desire to see Haftar brought into the process. There are real fears among this camp that Salame is intent on tilting the peace process and its outcomes in Haftar's favour, opening the way for the Field Marshall to fulfil his ambition of taking control of the country.

At the moment, however, the Higher State Council in Tripoli, or at least its leadership, looks willing to give Salame the benefit of the doubt, and both sides are engaging in a way not seen for a very long time.

### **Obstacles**

While this engagement and more positive air is promising, it may not be sufficient to secure the implementation of Salame's action plan. Although the negotiations to amend

the political agreement may be ongoing, the big issues are already proving no less contentious than before.

Most important of all is Haftar and what role he will or will not play in Libya's reconfigured political and security structures. Haftar, who has styled himself as Libya's saviour and strongman, has notched up a string of military successes over the past year that have included taking control of the Oil Crescent, Benghazi and the south of the country. This has made him the largest single power in the country by far, for while his opponents may be many, they are hopelessly fragmented. This has made Haftar even more determined to play a leading role, if not the leading role in the country. He is certainly not going to accept anything less than full control of Libya's military and security bodies, something his opponents, who view him as the embodiment of the counter-revolution, refuse to countenance.

That is not to say that there aren't some signs of a shift in approach with this new action plan. But this shift seems to be more about political manoeuvring than any genuine willingness to cede ground. The House, for example, is engaged in discussions on how to amend the political agreement, including the highly contentious Article 8 of the Additional Provisions, which gives the Presidency Council the power to make appointments to senior civilian, military and security posts, an article that both Haftar and the House have long opposed. But the House's discussions, including on this Article, seem to be wrapped up in a wider effort to amend the political agreement in such a way as to reframe the political structures to its advantage.

Forces in the west of Libya, including some powerful elements in Misrata, meanwhile, appear more ready than before to acknowledge Haftar, with some seemingly prepared to accept the idea of his being given a senior post. However, even these elements are not ready to give him anywhere near the space or power he craves.

Despite that positive advances are being made, Libya is still at risk of falling back into the old trap of both sides prevaricating and deliberating over peripheral issues in the desire to be seen to be doing something, while effectively ceding very little real ground on the core points. It was precisely this approach that characterised so much of the negotiating that preceded the signing of the 2015 agreement.

Meanwhile, Haftar seems intent on making further in-roads in the west of Libya, trying to win over powers on the ground to expand his area of control. Although the recent violence that erupted in Sabrata in September 2017 was ostensibly a turf war between competing forces, both of whom are involved in the town's lucrative trafficking networks, the fact that Haftar supported the winning force, and that the force itself was somewhat ambiguous about where its loyalties lie, has left some in the west of Libya feeling

increasingly as though the ground is shifting underneath their feet, further jeopardising the chances of peace.

Unless there is a serious change of approach by both sides in this conflict, therefore, Salame's new action plan risks becoming as doomed as those that have come before it. Such an outcome would mark yet another calamity for Libya, whose citizens are having to live with the everyday chaos and uncertainty that six years without a proper centralised authority brings. If one of the tragedies of Gaddafi's Libya was its over centralised state, the tragedy of Libya in the post-Gaddafi era is having no state at all.

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