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“(IL)Liberal Peace” As a Solution? Rethinking Pitfalls in Post-Gaddafi Libya’s Sociopolitical Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This research is motivated by the question of why Libya has derailed from “liberal democratic” transition path following the demise of Gaddafi’s authoritarian regime by international intervention in 2011. The paper analyzes post-Gaddafi Libya’s sociopolitical transformation by employing a holistic framework which focuses on interaction between key international and domestic dynamics as a major determinant of the ongoing political turmoil and failed peace-building initiatives. Utilizing process-tracing as methodological framework, the paper identifies the repercussions of interaction between international and domestic dynamics across three thematic sectors: “geopolitical competition” that involves non-state armed actors as well as regional and great powers, “war economy” based primarily on struggle for controlling Libya’s rich hydrocarbon resources, and the rivalry between traditional and emerging norms of “conflict management”. The analysis arrives at two main conclusions regarding post-Gaddafi Libya’s sociopolitical transformation: firstly, both foreign and domestic actors increasingly operate by the logic of winner-takes-all, which turns any power-sharing/peacebuilding initiative into a zero-sum game. Secondly, the idea of ending Libya’s political deadlock through a military solution, to be followed by establishment of an authoritarian leadership, has considerably extended its appeal within either factions to Libyan politics especially since 2014 elections.

Keywords: Post-Gaddafi Libya, Conflict Resolution, Peacebuilding, Liberal Peace, Authoritarian Model of Conflict Management.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper analyzes why post-Gaddafi Libya has derailed from “liberal democratic” transition path by reconstructing key mechanisms of Libya’s socio-political transformation with a special focus on the interaction between international and domestic dynamics. During the “Arab Revolts”, Muammar Gaddafi’s rule faced with armed opposition, in response to which Gaddafi unleashed brutal force to suppress. The clash between the opposition and forces loyal to Gaddafi turned into a full-scale armed conflict in a very short time. The international actors pioneered by the NATO powers - albeit the US, Britain and France – called for an international intervention based on humanitarian concerns and the controversial norm of “responsibility to protect”. When Gaddafi was deposed in 2011 with the help of foreign involvement, the interveners had in their mind a liberal democratic transformation for Libyan Jamahiriya. However, the current conditions on the ground tell quite a different story. After more than a decade, Libyan politics is still far from any stable, and more importantly legitimate, resolution. And given the abound human rights abuses, growing food insecurity,

and extensive power vacuum in Libya, the ongoing political turmoil spawns grave threats to not only Libya but also for its broader vicinity.

As such, the reasons for, and key dynamics of, why Libya has still not been crowned with peace, welfare, and democracy following demise of Gaddafi’s authoritarian regime have received a good deal of attention in both academic and policy circles. The paper suggests a classification of these perspectives under two broad categories based on their level of analysis. First group of studies sets for explaining the ways of international factors such as geopolitics, security and economic interests of state and non-state actors (ex. Russia-affiliated Wagner Group) preventing/promoting Libya’s political transition to democracy (e.g., Zambakari, 2016; Zoubir, 2020; Aktürk, 2021). These comments aim to demonstrate that due to their irreconcilable agendas those involved in the Libyan conflict has inflicted serious damage upon Libyan politics. A good and oft-cited example of this is the contradictory policies of the European Union and member states which have been driven primarily by managing migration flows to Europe through Libya (e.g., Pradella & Rad, 2017). The second group of perspectives,

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on the other hand, adopts a historico-institutional approach by examining local dynamics of conflict with specific interest in the lack of institutions, the implications of Gaddafi era politics on Libyan polity, and prevalence of armed non-state actors (e.g., Randall, 2015; Sawani, 2018; Badi, 2021). Development, and also implications, of weak state institutions, as well as a rentier economy, in Libya's post-colonial state-building process is considered as the major block before Libya's democratization process.

Accordingly, both group of, as well as other, perspectives regarding the political trajectory of post-Gaddafi Libya have examined in isolation the complex process of international forces' intertwining with domestic structures and networks, overlooking in particular its dissolving impact on the viability of "liberal peace" as a framework for conflict resolution and peacebuilding (see also Cooper, 2007; Chandler, 2010) in the case of post-Gaddafi Libya. Although there are previous studies focusing on the interaction between international and domestic mechanisms as a major determinant of Gaddafi's demise (Bilgenöğlu & Mengüaslan, 2020) and of Libya's broader sociopolitical transformation (Yalvaç & Mengüaslan, 2024), less attention has been paid to its implications for ongoing political turmoil and failed liberal peace-building initiatives in post-Gaddafi period.

To address this gap in the literature, the paper employs an interactive framework that examines key linkages among the geopolitical, geoeconomic (war economy), and normative (competing norms of conflict resolution) dimensions of post-Gaddafi Libya's protracted and multidimensional turmoil. It aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the interaction between foreign actors' self-interested and containment-focused involvement in Libyan politics and Libya's domestic sociopolitical features (such as lopsidedly developed state institutions and oil-dependent economy) as a major source of the pitfalls evolved in Libya's political transition from Gaddafi's authoritarian regime. Process-tracing serves as the methodological framework for the paper's in-depth analysis of post-Gaddafi Libya's sociopolitical transformation (or its current stagnation) as a single-case study. The research draws primarily on utilization of empirical data obtained through fieldwork-based reports by international organizations (e.g., UNSMIL), and NGOs (e.g., International Crisis Group), as well as policy think tanks. An interpretivist approach is used to analyze the collected data, which is contrasted by the arguments suggested by the academic sources.

The paper contributes to the literature by arguing that an illiberal solution looms larger over post-Gaddafi Libyan

politics as the liberal peace-building framework's key objectives (i.e., political reconciliation, the establishment of inclusive and legitimate governing structure), albeit prominent norms, have been transmuted by a complex set of mechanisms - reflecting broader shifts in systemic competition not just within geopolitical and economic spheres but also in the normative domain. In this vein, the paper's findings promise fresh insights not only into the political transformation following Gaddafi's overthrown but also the prospects for liberal conflict resolution frameworks. To put it another way, Libya's trajectory pledges one of the key moments for restoring the faith in "liberal peace" as a model for political transition from authoritarian/non-democratic regimes. Moreover, given the other ongoing civil conflicts such as the Syrian crisis, and the protracted peacebuilding initiatives as in the case of the Palestinian issue plaguing the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the paper's conclusions may offer alternative and pragmatic recommendations for fostering regional peace and security.

The organization of the paper is as follows: the first section engages with the thematic implications of Gaddafi era social and institutional reforms upon making of a "decentralized", "rentier", and "tribal" state of Libya. This section gives a brief overview of the ways these reforms contributed to persistence and reproduction of weak state institutions, a heavily rentier economy, and sub-state traditional identities. The second section examines the repercussions of complex interaction between Libya's domestic features and international dynamics to the ongoing political turmoil across three key mechanisms consisting of geopolitical contest, war economy, and competitive interaction between traditional liberal and emerging/authoritarian norms of conflict resolution. The focus is on how, and also why, "liberal peacebuilding" initiatives have failed to prevail in post-Gaddafi Libya.

LEGACIES OF "JAMAHIRIYA": DE-INSTITUTIONALIZATION, RENTIERISM, AND TRIBALISM

When Libya gained its independence in 1951, it was ruled by King Idris (1951-1969) as a monarchy which predominately organized along tribal affiliations and relied on the network of the Sanussiyya religious sect in Cyrenaica. Indeed, post-colonial Libyan monarchy was more like a loose federation of three main regions – Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan (Ahmida, 2005: 6). Until the discovery of rich hydrocarbon reserves in 1959, Libyan economy remained highly dependent on revenues incurred from a military base leased to Britain and the sale of scrap metal left from World War II.

The beginning of oil production had profound implications on Libya’s sociopolitical transformation. King Idris utilized oil revenues to co-opt possible dissenting tribes against his monarchy while rewarding those loyal to himself. He established an extensive clientelist, and corporatist networks based on tribal affiliations to redistribute oil revenues, leading to the persistence of tribal and kinship relations. As such, the flow of substantial oil revenues became one of the central dynamics that distorted the institutionalization of state by leading to overdevelopment of its redistributive and security functions. And, from its inception, the building of a “Libyan nation” in the modern sense coexisted with the persistence and reproduction of traditional tribal affiliations and kinship ties. Despite his extensive clientelist network, however, King Idris could not neutralize the growing social discontent against his pro-Western foreign policy stance (e.g., as to the Arab Israeli War and the Palestinian issue). The elusive ground on which the Libyan monarchy’s foundations rested was severely upset when young military officer Muammar Gaddafi, inspired by radical ideas such as Arab nationalism and anti-imperialism championed by the charismatic Egyptian leader Gamal Abdul Nasser, had overthrown King Idris on September 1, 1969.

Muammar Gaddafi’s rule lasted for more than 40 years during which numerous pivotal moments and reforms were witnessed (see also Vandewalle, 2012), and therefore warrants a more thorough examination than presented here. However, considering the limits of space and subject of the paper, the study focuses on the implications of Gaddafi era across three thematic areas: “institutionalization of the state,” “economic transformation,” and “social development,” as these are the sectors most prominently representing the major problematic issues in post-Gaddafi Libya’s sociopolitical transformation.

Firstly, Muammar Gaddafi’s internal security oriented reforms were critical in the making of Libyan Jamahiriya’s (*state of the masses*) peculiar political institutions. Gaddafi based his 1969 revolution on the Egyptian example. As such, his initial step following the deposal of King Idris was to establish a similar political system to the “Arab Socialist Union” to mobilize Libyans along with his revolution. Yet, Libya had different economic, political, and social structures compared to Egypt. Libya, unlike Egypt, did not own large arable lands for extensive agricultural production and most of the Libyans preferred to continue their nomadic living style despite reforms encouraging urbanization. Once land tenure reform

was not a viable option to garner support from popular, and especially rural, classes in Libya, Gaddafi turned to Libya’s most strategic economic asset – oil. After he managed to nationalize Libya’s hydrocarbon resources, Gaddafi benefited from increasing oil revenues to enact his revolutionary ideas (Ahmida, 2005: 78). He attempted to construct a new power base by dismantling the previous one based on Sanussiyya sect in Cyrenaica. Thus, any powerful social group, establishment, or tribal notables from the monarchical rule became the direct target of revolutionary reforms. And he introduced “Popular Congresses” as an instrument of political participation which in theory would allow Libyans to express themselves politically yet in reality enabled Gaddafi to suppress any opposition before its start. This repressive trend grew further when Libya was subjected to regime of international sanctions during the late 1980s and 1990s, with the allegations of Gaddafi’s support to international terrorist networks. The US-led sanctions put Libya in a politically isolated position, even an international pariah state (Zoubir, 2006: 49). Subsequently, Libya was deprived of the blessings of US-led liberal order, meaning that it would be much more difficult to acquire foreign technology, expertise, and equipment vital to the sustenance of oil production. Moreover, the concurrent oil boom and bust cycles in the 1980s only further deteriorated the situation for Gaddafi’s regime by disrupting the flow of oil revenues. Against this backdrop, Gaddafi became more concerned about protecting his revolutionary regime. He opted for new political reforms - more repressive and security-oriented institutional reforms - which in the end led to development of more bifurcated and overlapping state organs. Through the political reforms, Gaddafi positioned himself as the “Guide of the Revolution” and put himself above the Jamahiriya’s formal administrative structures (Vandewalle, 2012: 6). In due course, the revolutionary Jamahiriya turned into a highly centralized and repressive polity where the power laid mainly at the hands of Gaddafi and his dualistic security forces completely loyal to himself.

Secondly, Gaddafi envisioned a radical Arab socialist economic transformation, characterized by state intervention in finance, planning, and the execution of investments on the basis of state-led import substitution industrialization. Despite being labeled as Arab socialist, however, economic model of the Jamahiriya was closer to state capitalism. The hydrocarbon sector, upon which the economic foundation of the Jamahiriya largely relied, was controlled by the National Oil Corporation (NOC). In addition to that, the state-owned enterprises oversaw

other economic activities and regulated their contracts with foreign companies. More importantly, growth of any autonomous socioeconomic class was strictly prohibited as the Libyan state exclusively managed economic transactions (St. John, 2008: 129-130). These policies, undergirded by stable flow of oil revenues, provided the necessary momentum for Gaddafi's radical sociopolitical transformation. However, the same reforms were not sufficient to achieve modernization and industrialization through import substitution. For they were not driven by economic rationality but by motivation to boost revolutionary fervor, i.e., loyalty against Gaddafi. To this end, Gaddafi allocated huge amounts of financial resources to his infrastructure projects (also known as "crazy projects"). A classic example of this was the "Great Man-Made River" project, which aimed at expanding irrigated lands into Fezzan where most of land was desert. Aside from negligible boost to revolutionary zeal among Libyans, these and other crazy projects merely contributed to Libya's dependence on foreign technology and equipment. Consequently, despite its oil revenues, the Libyan Jamahiriya shared the common economic fate of many late-developing countries on the periphery and could not manage its transition from a rentier economy to an industrialized one.

Thirdly, Gaddafi's political and economic reforms implicated deeply upon Libya's social development. According to Hinnebusch (1984: 69), Libya's experience can be described as a case of "crash modernization", characterized by significant social costs. In contrast, Ahmida (2012: 78-79) presents a more optimistic view than Hinnebusch, arguing that the Jamahiriya as a political experiment reflects the historical and cultural specificities of Libya. Indeed, with hindsight, it is reasonable to assert that Libya's social development during Jamahiriya was primarily driven by Gaddafi's concerns about securing his regime against internal and external pressures. Following the 1969 coup, Gaddafi saw the predominance of kinship and tribal networks as a major threat against his revolutionary ideas. In a way, this was why he introduced a model of decentralized, anti-modernist state that would challenge any form of social stratification, whether modern (such as bourgeoisie, working class, and bureaucrats) or traditional (tribal). The outcome of his reforms however was the opposite of what he planned - reproduction and further entrenchment of traditional features of Libyan society, albeit under contemporary conditions. For instance, when his revolutionary committees and congresses failed to absorb oppositional movements, Gaddafi had to turn again to tribal networks to coopt dissent. The tribal

affiliations were also instrumentalized in the context of favoring certain tribes with bureaucratic positions while marginalizing ethnic minorities and tribes in Cyrenaica. Ultimately, Gaddafi's regime fashioned a Libyan society that was deeply fragmented along traditional kinship and tribal identities and highly dependent on state.

In summary, the institutional, economic, and social structures inherited from Gaddafi's Jamahiriya should not be viewed in a static manner, as such an approach would obscure the ways in which the historical and social features of Libyan society have evolved into new and complex forms in the post-Gaddafi context (Issaev & Zakharov, 2020). In other words, concepts such as "stateless state" or "accidental state" (Vandewalle, 2012), which aim to describe the specificities of the Libya's weak state institutions and rentier economy, fail to account for the dynamic relationships contributing to political turmoil in post-Gaddafi Libya. It should not mean however that Libyan state Gaddafi left behind was not authoritarian, rentier, and overdeveloped in repression and re-distribution functions. To the contrary, the specificities of Libyan state attest to implications of interaction between international and domestic dynamics onto the sociopolitical transformation.

AFTER TOPPLING OF GADDAFI: DYNAMICS OF ENDLESS CONFLICT IN LIBYA

When social protests erupted against Gaddafi's regime during the Arab Revolts, it quickly turned into an armed conflict between opposition groups and those remained loyal to Gaddafi. In this context, the primary objective of international intervention was to prevent the opposition from being crushed under Gaddafi's brutal response. However, as Lisa Anderson (2017) argued, international interventions in Libya since the Ottoman period have only further complicated the political landscape. In this case, post-intervention Libya has turned into a fragile, and in some respects a failed state (Sawani, 2018: 80), mainly due to the political contest which produced two additional civil wars after Gaddafi. Moreover, Libyan state has been failing to provide most of the public services, which has put vast segments of society under harsh living conditions. Some pessimist analysts such as Ammar (2022: 1), even argue that Libya's social fabric may have been so irreparably damaged that any attempt at national reconciliation would be futile.

In essence, after toppling of Gaddafi, Libya has fallen victim to an endless contest for power involving foreign state, as well as non-state actors, and unfolding through geopolitical, geoeconomic, and normative spheres.

As such, post-Gaddafi Libyan politics necessitates an interactive framework well-suited to be able to grasp the implications of complex and multidimensional mechanisms at play. The argument below draws on a framework that integrates three of the most prominent mechanisms -among several others- shaping the failure of liberal peacebuilding attempt in Libya, “geopolitical competition”, “war economy”, and the rivalry between traditional and emerging norms of “conflict management”. For these mechanisms, and key linkages among them, have become particularly relevant to proliferation, and persistence, of armed non-state actors, failed efforts to establish a legitimate government, and splitting of state institutions, which together reflect the broader implications of Libya’s diversion from liberal solution.

To illustrate, Libya’s current political turmoil has been entangled in a fierce geopolitical competition unfolding on national, international, and regional levels, as a result of which Libya’s political deadlock has been characterized as an internationalized conflict (e.g., Joffe, 2019; Colombo & Varvelli, 2020; Melcangi, & Mezran, 2022). The involvement of foreign state, as well as non-state, actors has thoroughly upset the Libyan politics which set stage for interim governments with limited authority, civil wars involving rival governments, upset negotiation tables, and shelved political agreements aiming at a peaceful resolution. Likewise, post-2011 Libyan economy has turned into a war economy combining oil revenues, strategic aids from foreign powers, as well as money flows acquired from illegal activities ranging from human trafficking and smuggling to control of strategic locations (Eaton, 2018: 7, 23–25). War economy structures, networks, and activities reflect the most salient implications of complex interaction between international geoeconomic contest and domestic sociopolitical characteristics, such as failed processes of DDR (disarmament, discharge and re-integration of armed groups) and re-centralization of state authority (Capasso, 2020). Thirdly, the normative plane on which Libya’s conflict resolution/mediation process has been overseen has undergone significant transformation since 2011, in that, to the contrary of the expectations of intervening actors, liberal and democratic peace framework failed at guiding post-intervention Libya’s sociopolitical transition. Moreover, as Libyan conflict has become more internationalized, conflict resolution has itself become another site for contest between traditional liberal and emerging/authoritarian norms (Costantini & Santini, 2021; Lewis, 2022; Keen, 2021).

Beyond Geopolitical Competition: Persistence of Decentralizing Factors in Libya

To begin with, geopolitical competition at the national and regional-international levels have functioned as a counterforce to attempts at centralizing political authority and monopolizing the use of force within the post-Gaddafi state (Megerisi, 2020: 1) by seriously undermining the already weak state institutions (especially Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior) and further complicating the overlapping authorities within these institutions (Yeşilyurt, 2023: 469). A case in point is the establishment of a legitimate governing structure in the post-2011 period, which has become an integral part of domestic geopolitical contest. An interim government—the National Transitional Council (NTC)—was established in 2011 in Benghazi (later relocated to Tripoli) to guide Libya toward elections. According to Mezran (2018: 213), the NTC’s prioritization of holding national elections in 2012 rather than addressing first the issues such as ensuring national reconciliation and disarmament of proliferating militias after the fall of Gaddafi was critical in crystallization of divisions between the rival factions in Libya’s post-2011 governing structures. The Arab Revolts in Libya, as Mezran (2018: 213) argues, was more than “a simple revolt of a population against the long-term dictator and his few mercenaries.” It was a civil war, as there were also groups supporting the Gaddafi regime against the opposition. Moreover, the 2011 social protests against Gaddafi were driven by tribal affiliations and unfolded on a city-by-city basis, each with diverse agendas (Hweio, 2012: 112). The fragmented and polarized nature of the opposition persisted even after Gaddafi was deposed. An outstanding example of this was the voting on secessionist demands in local councils. Seeking to capitalize on the nationwide power vacuum, opposition groups in Misrata and Benghazi utilized the Gaddafi-era governing bodies, such as the popular congresses and local councils, to hold independent elections from the NTC and voted for secession. Subsequently, the NTC denied legitimacy to these decisions; however, these moves demonstrated from the very beginning how difficult the process of political re-centralization would be in post-Gaddafi Libya.

Under these circumstances, the 2012 elections for the General National Congress (GNC) had two significant outcomes for Libya’s political transition. First, having a liberal economic agenda, the National Forces Alliance (NFA) led by Mahmoud Jibril gained 48% of the votes. However, Justice and Construction Party (affiliated with Muslim Brotherhood) -combined with the Islamist

oriented politicians elected independently- also secured a non-negligible victory. And the election results proved that a mutually beneficial relationship between politicians and armed groups was evolving, in that, politicians secured electoral success and in return armed groups utilized political power to advance their own agendas (Issaev & Zakharov, 2020: 57). This can be seen in the passing of Resolution No.7 (military operation against armed groups loyal to Gaddafi) and the controversial “Political Isolation Law”, which barred individuals involved in Gaddafi-era governing structures from participating in politics for a decade (Lacher, 2020: 30). In addition to creating an exclusionary political context, these two proposals demonstrated the expanding clout of armed militia within the GNC and their growing embeddedness in formal state institutions such as Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior (Aslan, 2020: 146-147). Secondly, the proliferation of armed groups and emergence of a new political movement, Islamism, acquired a new meaning in post-2012 elections Libya when the foreign actors involved in Libyan conflict expressed starkly contrasting responses to growing influence of Islamist politicians within the GNC. Countries such as Türkiye, and Qatar warmly welcomed the election results and the rise of Islamist-affiliated political movements, while others, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, expressed their concerns (see, Telci, 2020; Aktürk, 2021).

The ways in which this elusive interaction between international and national dynamics of Libyan politics has been feeding the drive for the establishment of rival governments and spiraling of a vicious circle of civil wars have become more pronounced in the run up to the 2014 parliamentary elections for House of Representatives (HoR). In response to the expansion of the influence of Islamist politicians and armed militias over weak state institutions through the use of force, as well as the increase in their exclusionary and marginalizing attitudes against other political factions, opposition groups, including the NFA, Gaddafi regime supporters, and federalism advocates, began to unite under the leadership of Khalifa Haftar. And when the GNC decided to reject ending its mandate, which was supposed to conclude in February 2014, Haftar launched “Operation Dignity” in May against GNC-aligned armed militias, including jihadist groups such as Ansar al-Sharia, in Benghazi.

In certain respects, these developments were the early signs of Libya’s deviation from the path of liberal power-sharing, as well as increasing appeal of using armed forces to ensure political decisions (Sawani, 2020: 48). This is evidenced by the reaction of the Islamist parties

against the results of 2014 elections when they could not secure a dominant position in the HoR. The armed militias aligned with the Islamist political actors did not allow the newly elected members of the HoR to convene in Tripoli. As a consequence, the HoR was compelled to relocate to Tobruk due to growing pressures by Islamist armed militia. Those moved to Tobruk declared their support to Haftar’s Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) and his campaign over Islamist militias in Benghazi in 2014. In response, those stayed in Tripoli founded a rival government backed by Islamist politicians and armed militia who formed a coalition called “Libya Dawn” against Haftar’s forces. When international actors recognized the HoR as a legitimate legislative body, despite the Libyan Supreme Court ruling the HoR invalid in 2014, it only added new dimensions of controversy to the prevailing disputes regarding the status and legitimacy of rival governments.

After the failure of the peaceful transfer of power from the GNC to the HoR, along with other specific developments, the international, as well as regional, actors started to become more relevant to Libya’s geopolitical equation. Until then, the international actors maintained a low level of engagement based on ‘local ownership’ principle and had limited themselves to supporting and advisory roles in Libya’s political transformation. However, by 2015, issues such as the unprecedented rise in irregular migration to Europe from African countries, the expansion of terrorist networks in power vacuums within Libya, and the spillover effects of conflicts in other regions on Libya—and vice versa—necessitated a calculated reshaping of international engagement in the domestic political contest in Libya.

Subsequently, a multidimensional geopolitical sphere linking Libya, the Sahel region, the Middle East and Europe has begun to emerge especially due to the transnational threats such as irregular migration and the rise of radical Islamist terrorist networks. For instance, due to various armed groups that refused to disarm after Gaddafi’s fall, the decentralization of authority in Libya, particularly in the south, has led to increased control by communities such as the Tebu and Tuareg along the Libya’s borders with Sahel countries. Until 2015 when the EU countries managed to develop effective strategies for combating irregular migration and controlling migration flows, these communities generated a significant illicit economic network based on human smuggling. The criminalization of irregular migration by the EU thus directly threatened these communities’ livelihood (Tinti, 2024). As a consequence, the already stalled process of

political centralization, due to the emergence of two rival government structures in Libya, became even more complicated, as southern tribes sought to preserve the economic gains and political power they had attained in the post-Gaddafi era (Tinti, 2024: 20).

Moreover, the instability in Libya’s southern region resulted in uncontrolled flow of heavily trained and equipped fighters, as well as arms, into the Sahel region (Lacher, 2017). In this respect, the control of several cities such as Derna and Sirte by ISIS- affiliated groups towards the end of 2015 was a game changer, in that, it not only changed the context of Islamist militia and politicians’ political tenure but also transformed the way international actors have involved in Libya’s sociopolitical transformation.

However, the task of dismantling Islamist terrorist networks in Libya’s chaotic environment led to a complex and sometimes contradictory actions. On the one hand, in 2016 the two factions in Libya came to terms on establishing a unity government—the Government of National Accord (GNA)—led by Fayeze el-Sarraj under the auspices of the UN. Yet on the other hand, in response to GNA’s collaboration with the US against ISIS, Haftar sought Russian support for his campaign against Islamist militants in Benghazi (Krylova, 2017: 588). As such, Libya’s domestic power struggle after Gaddafi evolved once again into a broader internationalized conflict due to selective involvement of international actors.

In essence, the external powers’ involvement was in large part necessitated by Libya’s fragile and decentralized state institutions, for the interim government in charge failed to mobilize its security forces due to prevailing armed militia that easily shifted their loyalty. The cooperation against the threat of ISIS bore its fruits in a short period time (as shown by escaping of ISIS affiliated armed militia towards desert leaving from key locations in 2017); however, the external involvement had also several adverse effects on capacity-building and centralization efforts in Libya. To illustrate, after Gaddafi, the flow of arms and fighters into the region unleashed a wave of separatist movements and transnational terrorist networks (ex. the separatist and Islamist movement led by the Tuaregs in the Sahel). For instance, the Tuareg and Berber communities in the south of Libya attacked the oil fields in 2013 and disrupted oil production to compel the already weak government for concessions and oil revenues (Gentry, 2019: 123). Subsequently, with a range of objectives—including securing access to Libya’s oil revenues, combating irregular migration, countering extremism, and balancing against other

powers—numerous regional and international actors, such as France, Italy, Türkiye, and Chad, have continuously sought to establish a network of patronage over the armed militias in the Fezzan region (Raineri, 2022). The internationalization of power rivalry in Libya therefore introduced its second dynamic in the context of geopolitical contestation, i.e., the incorporation of additional areas of struggle such as political, economic, and security interests of foreign powers along with prevailing tribal, and ethnic divisions.

Accordingly, ‘winner-takes-all logic’ has begun to take over Libyan politics. In addition to the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) which has been the impartial international body overseeing mediation between rival factions and observing election processes, international-regional state and non-state actors have shown a growing commitment to backing either of the factions struggling for power in Libya. It has been widely recognized that powers such as Türkiye, Qatar, Italy are in general aligned with the Tripoli based government while Egypt, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia as well as Russia, and its affiliate paramilitary organization Wagner Group, provided military, financial and intelligence support to Khalifa Haftar (see ICG Report, 2021).

Thus, the struggle for power has begun on the one hand to include additional objectives such as securing oil exploration deals, keeping irregular migration flows at bay, and to divert from reaching a peaceful and democratic power sharing agreement among rival factions on the other. To give an example, Russia’s increasing military and paramilitary support for Haftar has particularly alarmed Western actors as this support could pose a significant threat to NATO members by extending Russian influence over the Mediterranean if Russia would secure a naval base in Tobruk (Eastern Libya) (Ramani, 2022: 11). Similarly, by the time separatist and anti-government movements against Sahel countries (e.g., Chad and Niger) found refuge in Libya’s political chaos and launched terrorist attacks from there, Libya’s African neighbors have had to involve in in post-Gaddafi Libya’s political crisis by giving up their initial reluctance (Gentry, 2019: 123) and favoring a strong-man solution with concerns of stability.

Indeed, the extent to which foreign involvement has become a decisive factor in Libya’s political future can best be seen in the “third civil war” that started in 2019 when Haftar’s LAAF attempted to invade Tripoli. After securing the control of oil fields (the Sahara and El-Feel) and strategic areas such as airbases and roads neighboring Benghazi, Haftar’s forces turned their direction towards

Tripoli in order to end power contest through a hard power-based solution. In doing so, Haftar received crucial support from Russia's Wagner Group (Krylova, 2017: 588). Likewise, it was largely due to Turkish technical support and military equipment (especially the Bayraktar drones) that the militias based in Tripoli succeeded in repelling Haftar's attack (Telci, 2020: 50). Türkiye's involvement in the Libyan geopolitical equation through hard power elements was a critical moment in further internationalization of the Libyan crisis (Quamar, 2020: 1). First and foremost, Türkiye's intervention functioned as an effective balancing act against growing impact of Haftar and his army by pushing for de-escalation of the conflict and return of the LAAF to its base. Secondly, Türkiye's support to GNA created a strategic shift in Libyan politics by paving the way for restarting negotiations for the unification of rival governments (the Berlin Process). As such, the balanced geopolitics of Libya, achieved through external actors after the third civil war, has enabled for a relative de-escalation of conflict, albeit a fragile stability, during which rival factions agreed upon establishing a unity government "Government of National Unity" (GNU). Although GNU could be functional only between 2021 and 2022, it was a significant step towards power-sharing agreement among rival governments.

On the other hand, given recent strategic shifts in the region, the elusive geopolitical balance in Libya could be recalibrated again. For instance, the collapse of Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria in December 2024 has such potential, as it would require Russia to reshape its engagement in other conflicts including Libya. Syria had been a key ally of Russia and a major outlet for Russia's naval power into the Mediterranean. Losing such a strategic ally could lead Russia to 'make a fragile pivot from Syria to Libya', as Badi (2025) puts it. Given the allegations of Russia's increased military personnel and equipment transfer to Haftar's LAAF (The New York Times, 19.12.2024), it can be argued that the relationship between Russia and Haftar has become more strategic, which in return could play a significant role in motivating Haftar to re-escalate the conflict in order to impose a military solution.

These examples, as well as others, highlight how diversely de-centralizing forces Libya's internationalized turmoil has been unleashing upon mediation efforts between rival governments. The ongoing geopolitical contest thus continues to be one of the critical dynamics slimming chances for a resolution based on power-sharing, even if it would not be liberal democratic.

Blessing or Curse? Hydrocarbon Fueled War Economy

In the post-2011 Libya, a broad-based war economy has evolved. The argument below focuses on two specific processes through which geoeconomic contest has been influential over protraction of political reconciliation, endurance of proliferated armed militia, and the splitting of state institutions.

Firstly, war economy structures have been disrupting peaceful resolution of conflict primarily by augmenting the strife between struggling factions. In the chaotic environment following Gaddafi's ouster, local armed groups have been authorized, and payrolled, by the Ministry of Internal Affairs to oversee key state functions such as provision of security, cleaning of cities, and border control (Perroux, 2019: 205). According to Sawani (2020: 57), successive governments in the post-2011 period could not subordinate these groups under their authority. On the contrary, the governments preferred to appease the armed militia by delegating official tasks and providing financial assistance, resulting in overlapping areas and sectors of authority. Costantini (2016: 414) describes this situation as warlordism, for grasping such authority provides these groups with immense political and economic power, even granting word over political reconciliation process.

The involvement of foreign actors in Libyan war economy structures had a further destructive impact on recentralization of state authority. In providing untapped resources to local armed groups and rival factions, international involvement has been encouraging spoilers of political reconciliation. An intriguing example of this is the financial assistance allocated by the EU to local armed militia primarily for the purpose of curbing irregular migration. After 2015 (when irregular migration to Europe was unprecedentedly high), the European Commission, in addition to member countries, began to collaborate with municipalities under control of local groups to improve governance structures and rule of law in Libya (Marcuzzi, 2022: 149). However, when EU's self-interested approach has not extended from economic assistance to military support, it turned into an instrument that spoilers of political process have benefited most.

Secondly, war economy networks have been pivotal in fueling divisive and secessionist forces against political centralization efforts. In parallel with the outset of the Second Civil War in 2014, two rival camps started to crystallize as argued above. The economic significance of governance fragmentation was that the war economy

enabled, and in some respects promoted, the split of state institutions along rival governments (ICG Report, 2019). The most obvious site of geoeconomic struggle since the fall of Gaddafi has been the Central Bank of Libya (CBL). CBL is quite crucial for Libya’s rival factions as it reposit the oil revenues and oversees financial allocations. The intermittent struggle between the rival factions over the control of CBL both highlights the constant risk of escalation into direct conflict and exacerbates the already abound institutional defects, e.g., preventing transition governments to administer Libya’s budget as they wanted (Perroux, 2015: 4). For instance, denied from access to oil revenues by the CBL, the HoR attempted to control the eastern division of CBL by designating its own governor. And to finance its expenditures, it utilized public debt mechanism between 2014 and 2019. The geoeconomic contest became more complicated when international actors involved in as in the example of Russian Federation’s printing Libyan Dinar to enable Haftar paying the mercenaries recruited in LAAF (Krylova, 2017: 584) when CBL renounced allocating economic resources to its Eastern Branch in Benghazi (WB, 2021: 4) with the purpose of putting Haftar in a hard position.

The “scramble for Libyan oil” is another salient example expressing the ways of how multidimensional geoeconomic rivalry intertwined with Libya’s war economy structures. In post-Gaddafi Libya, an intricate relationship has been developed between foreign powers and domestic factions to control oil production and export (Costantini, 2016: 410). The production and export of Libyan oil is overseen by National Oil Corporation (NOC) headquartered in Tripoli. However, the oil reserves are concentrated in the south and eastern regions which are under control of Haftar’s LAAF (Pargeter, 2020). Although local armed groups occasionally attempt to halt petroleum production (as in the case of Petroleum Facilities Guard’s seizure of oil fields in 2013 and in 2018 again) to push for secessionist demands in the East by depriving Libyan economy of oil revenues (ICG Report, 2015: 6-10), as of 2019 LAAF and armed groups loyal to Haftar gained a significant leverage by capturing all oil ports of Libya (Ras Lanuf, Es Sider, Marsa el Hariga, and Zueitina). Moreover, Haftar announced that Libyan oil would be sold by the eastern branch of NOC and oil revenues would be deposited in the eastern division of CBL. Against this backdrop, the international actors saw an opportunity through which they could promote de-escalation of conflict by encouraging joint management of oil production and export by the rival factions. Accordingly, the international community declared that they would conduct oil trade exclusively

with the Tripoli-based NOC, while conceding to Haftar’s control over Libya’s oil reserves. Indeed, promoting the establishment of joint economic management system to create a solid ground for political reconciliation has recently become a prominent strategy for international actors. In this context, although it has had little impact on political centralization, an informal agreement on a revenue-sharing model was reached in 2022 between officials of the two rival governments (Haftar in the East and Dbeibah in the West) (ICG, 2024: 2).

Nevertheless, the involvement of foreign actors in Libyan war economy did not always guarantee such stabilizing results as can be seen in the case of closing oil exploration and drilling deals. When the oil deals between the Government of National Unity (GNU) and Türkiye (2022); and Italy (2023) were concluded successfully in return for their political support to GNU, the deals aroused strong opposition from rival regional actors such as Egypt and Greece which sided with Tobruk-based House of Representatives and Haftar.

These, as well as other examples, demonstrate not only how Libyan oil has been weaponized as part of a geoeconomic rivalry but also reflect a social ailing it led to, i.e., tenacity of social fragmentation (mostly along tribal identities). War economy bestows armed groups with lucrative ventures; however, it is also responsible for countless economic problems – accumulation of public debt, social disempowerment, and liquidity crises. Since the Libyan state could not sufficiently meet most of its economic obligations, the dire economic situation many Libyans have been facing reinforce traditional clientelist and patrimonial networks that rely on re-distribution of rentier revenues (in this case, income generated from war economy structures) (WB, 2021, pp.10-11). The structure of Haftar-led LAAF equally proves this assertion that war economy culminates in the persistence of substate affiliations. To Eaton (2021), what brings together the dissimilar LAAF militia is exclusive patronage relations of Cyrenaica inherited from Gaddafi era Jamahiriya.

To sum, emerging financial, economic, and military networks that together constituted Libya’s war economy weaken state authority and disrupt endeavours of recentralizing it, while strengthening the spoilers of Libyan conflict by ensuring their financial resources. In this regard, being a principal component of the war economy, Libya’s hydrocarbon resources have so far turned out to be more of a curse than a blessing upon post-Gaddafi Libya’s sociopolitical transformation.

Pitfalls in “Liberal Peace”: Competing Norms of Conflict Resolution

The traditional framework for conflict resolution, also known as liberal peace, is based on liberal understanding of international politics which suggests that empowerment of democratic governance and liberal market would on the one hand facilitate reconciliation in areas of conflict and foster peaceful international relations on the other (for a detailed discussion, see Richmond, 2006; Paris, 2010). As a framework for peacebuilding, it has been particularly dominant following the Cold War's end (Heathershaw, 2008), and recently utilized, with adaptations to case specific conditions, in numerous civil conflicts including Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Sierra Leone. Its overall performance in conflict areas can be described as multifarious by looking at the criticisms directed against liberal mode of peacebuilding as being an imperialist instrument of Western powers (see for instance, Selby, 2013; Chandler, 2015). In this regard, the case of Libya has marked a significant milestone in the trajectory of liberal peacebuilding initiatives (Chandler, 2012: 221), as it has not only demonstrated how liberal peacebuilding norms transmuted (i.e., arising principles of local ownership and resilience) but also brought forward once again questions as to its viability in the face of emerging norms pioneered by rising non-Western powers (see Lewis et al., 2018).

To illustrate, in the case of Libya, United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) is the chief international organ overseeing Libya's conflict resolution and mediation attempts. Operating within liberal peace framework, UNSMIL has focused on encouraging political actors to come to terms with each other and promoting liberal values such as constitutionalism, rule of law, democratization, and respect for human rights. When the political actors in Libya could not succeed in establishing a legitimate and representative government after two national elections (in 2012 and 2014, respectively), it has assumed a key role by leading negotiations as a result of which 2015 “Libyan Political Agreement (LPA)” was signed proposing “Presidential Council” as an organ that would consist of members from both rival governments and be in charge of state and the Libyan army (Giumelli, 2020: 115). This liberal peacebuilding initiative's fate however can be described as tragic as it fell prey to more urgent problems on the ground, such as spreading of ISIS in 2015, the unprecedentedly high irregular migration flows to Europe as of 2015 and rise of emerging norms of conflict resolution.

Subsequently, when the intervening actors found the solution in adapting liberal peace to the conditions in Libya, the liberal peace framework, as it was, began to fail in putting Libya's reconciliation in track. There were several reasons underlying such shift. To Boduszyński (2017), Western actors did not have the leverage and linkages to impose what liberal peace required in Libya. In addition to that, neither of the factions were eager to accept any process of international monitoring in Libya (ICG Report, 2019). As a result of these and other dispositions, focus of liberal peacebuilding framework in Libya shifted to state-building- in a way that would be more suitable for foreign actors' immediate interests (see also Wagner & Anholt, 2016). Accordingly, it has been the complex interaction between international dynamics and domestic developments in Libya which fashioned the priority of peacebuilding process into containment of Libyan conflict, rather than providing a solution. The shift in liberal peacebuilding approach paradoxically permitted the spoilers of political reconciliation to impose their own narrower agendas. For instance, to be able to better cope with irregular migration flows, the EU member states needed a strong government to cooperate with. Thus, the EU's focus turned to supporting the GNA and protection of Tripoli. In return, the EU and member states would have leverage on Libya's political authority. When this plan did not work, the EU allowed its members to cooperate directly with local municipalities (i.e., armed militia, and local power holders) under the principles of “local ownership” and “building resilience”. Such moves resulted in two significant outcomes: while the cooperation between local and international actors adversely affected capacity building attempts in Libya, it further boosted the contesting rival governments towards a military solution rather than power-sharing (Giumelli, 2020: 118).

Moreover, the intertwining of domestic and international competition has already spilled into conflict resolution sector – as demonstrated by parallel initiatives of mediation, and negotiations hosted by other countries such as Türkiye, Russia, France, and UAE. And it was particularly obvious with criticisms, as well as staunch opposition, directed by the non-Western powers against liberal peace discourse (Sun & Zoubir, 2018: 239; Burton, 2019: 26; Lewis, 2022: 653). For instance, Russian and Chinese representatives in the UN voiced critically their convictions that liberal peace agenda had violated Libya's sovereign rights, and the principle of “ownership” by externally imposed solution. Given the internationalized nature of Libyan conflict, these perspectives suggested that Libyan-led political alternatives would be more

suitable to Libyan society (see also, Larssen, 2016; Kuo, 2012).

Costantini and Santini (2021: 2) use the term “authoritarian conflict resolution model” to describe the emerging norms of conflict mediation pioneered by the non-Western powers in the Libyan case. The authoritarian conflict management, despite still preliminary and underdeveloped as a framework, broadly implies the prioritization of political stability over liberal democratic governance, and utilization of biased mediators for mediation (Lewis, Heathershaw & Megoran, 2018; Keen, 2021: 246; Lewis, 2022: 653). While liberal peacebuilding strives to reach a legitimate power-sharing among rival actors, the authoritarian approach favours a strongman solution to political ails (Lewis, 2025) - General Haftar in the case of Libya. For instance, Akl (2019: 56) points to close relationship between Russian norm of conflict resolution – utility of military figures in conflict areas – and its support to Haftar. In return, backed by Russia, Haftar was able to turn down the political bodies settled on in LPA in 2015, and actualized his conviction – solving Libyan conflict through state capture and military conquest – by launching a military campaign (Operation Flood of Dignity) in 2019.

The “Berlin Process” of 2020 was thus considered as a key moment for liberal peacebuilding in Libya when it brought together all the involved parties and produced a solid political roadmap that appealed to both sides. It established again the High Council of State (HCS– in replacement of GNC) and recognized Tobruk-based HoR along with the former as two legitimate legislative bodies. And it designated Government of National Unity (GNU) as a unified executive body. Although the competing factions agreed upon a political reconciliation roadmap through the Berlin Process, combination of dynamics prevented the holding of elections since then. In the meantime, the GNU has lost its legitimacy as a unity government when Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah refused to resign after failing at organizing free and fair national elections and the HoR withdrew its recognition of GNU. Moreover, no solid progress has been achieved on a framework to unify budget and allocation of financial resources. According to Sawani (2020: 47), the establishment of new bodies and devising roadmaps have not necessarily implied any concrete step toward political reconciliation and liberal power-sharing as these institutions proved to be fragile, lacking social legitimacy, and contested by rival factions. Thus, when the GNU started to falter as a unified body, Libya’s state institutions split again as of 2022. Put differently, Libya has currently been ruled by

two states – the GNU based in the northwest Libya and the government led by Osama Hammad controlling the southern and eastern parts of Libya.

Given that the emerging norms of authoritarian conflict resolution have been also shared by other countries such as France, as well as the non-Western powers, Libyan socio-political transformation continues to mark a significant derailing from liberal peace model. Up to now, this has meant further entanglement of political reconciliation process by spawning crucial questions such as who would be the legitimate actor to govern Libya, as well as how he/she would be chosen. However, considering the hitherto performance, albeit transmutation, of liberal peace framework together with further entrenchment non-Western actors (especially Russia) recently in Libya, the prospects for an illiberal solution based on a strongman to stabilize Libya’s political turmoil have significantly risen.

CONCLUSION

The paper asserts that it has been the interaction between international geopolitical, economic, and normative rivalries and sociohistorical features of Libyan society which fashioned post-Gaddafi Libya’s sociopolitical transformation into a deadlock. The paper thus pinpointed two interactive ways how these international and domestic dynamics have come together in disrupting liberal peacebuilding and statebuilding initiatives since 2011.

Firstly, both foreign and domestic actors seem to have adopted the principle of winner-takes-all, which turns any peacebuilding initiative into a zero-sum game. In post-Gaddafi Libya the involvement of foreign actors has been a major source of criticism as it undermines the political reconciliation process by providing military, financial, and political support to domestic actors struggling for power. However, as the argument above demonstrated, it was not their involvement per se, but their self-interested and containment-focused style that has complicated Libyan politics so far. The more the negotiations for political resolution in Libya have comprised the irreconcilable agendas of foreign actors, the more the rival factions in Libya have become tenacious thanks to external backing. Likewise, the international geoeconomic contestation has been described as one of the critical dynamics of ongoing political rivalry as it has increased the stakes for winner by greatly contributing to growing of war economy in Libya. Nevertheless, implications of war economy upon Libya can only be partly understood without looking

at its close relationship to proliferated autonomous groups. By means of revenues generated from war economy structures, the rival governments, as well as the local armed groups, have been able to sustain their autonomy, which in return has rendered them more useful to the interests of external actors – i.e., GNU's collaborating with the EU to curb irregular migration to Europe, and GNU's signing a highly strategic maritime deal with Türkiye.

Secondly, the idea of ending Libya's political deadlock through a military solution, to be followed by establishment of an authoritarian leadership, has considerably extended its appeal to all parties especially since 2014 elections. As a result of this growing inclination, previous attempts of political reconciliation in the past 14 years (as of 2025 at the time of writing) have been stillborn. The rival parties have been unable to achieve political reconciliation since 2014 and have failed to reach an agreement on the necessary conditions for the conduct of elections. Indeed, post-Gaddafi Libya has become one of the cases that represents diminishing faith in liberal peacebuilding as a viable framework for conflict resolution. For the same mechanisms turning Libyan politics into a zero-sum-game also proved existing norms of liberal peacebuilding useless. It has become particularly pronounced when the EU, the exemplary of liberal peace, transmuted the modality of liberal peacebuilding in Libya by employing principles of resilience and local ownership. Such moves have not only led to loss of credibility on the side of traditional actors of peacebuilding but also undermined the trust in negotiations as a way of political solution. Moreover, the failure of liberal peacebuilding in Libya has given further momentum to the emerging norms of authoritarian model of conflict management as alternative frameworks for political resolution.

To conclude, as the liberal peace driven attempts to put Libya on track of democratic transition has constantly failed, Libyan politics plunges deeper into a deadlock and vice versa. Political instability, nation-wide power contest, and economic difficulties have been just a few of the problems which afflicted post-Gaddafi Libya since 2011. In sum, the prospect of a liberal peace in post-Gaddafi Libya remains unpromising as ever.

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