

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Conflict Resolution in Libya

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**Citation:** Srifi Y.H.(2023) Conflict Resolution in Libya. Open Science Journal 8(2)

**Received:** 13<sup>th</sup> November 2022

**Accepted:** 16<sup>th</sup> August 2023

**Published:** 14<sup>th</sup> November 2023

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**Funding:** The author(s) received no specific funding for this work

**Competing Interests:** The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

## Abstract:

The primary purpose of this study is to delve into the complex dynamics of the Libyan conflict, placing significant emphasis on key aspects like group solidarity among opposing factions and external interventions by partisan entities. Through a meticulous examination of empirical events and a comprehensive comparative analysis that draws from a range of conflict theories, including ripeness theory, instrumentalism, primordialism, protracted social conflict, and constructivism, this paper aims to underscore the critical role played by ideational factors in the Libyan conflict. It contends that these ideational elements hold greater sway than material considerations and asserts that achieving a lasting resolution hinges on the transformation of socially constructed identities and worldviews within the affected populations.

**Keywords:** Libyan conflict, Conflict resolution, Primordialism, Ripeness theory, Constructivism, Protracted social conflict, Instrumentalism

## Introduction

Libya's civil conflict has emerged as a growing concern with significant implications for transnational security. It is intricately intertwined with various factors, including its connections to Jihadism in Africa, the surge in illegal migration towards southern Europe, and its status as a battleground for foreign interventions. Notably, Libya, once an oil-rich nation under Gaddafi's rule, exhibited a unique approach by generously sponsoring its students to attend prestigious educational institutions such as the London School of Economics. Remarkably, these renowned institutions also received substantial financial support from the Gaddafi regime (The Guardian, 2011). Libya underwent a transformation following the NATO-supported Arab Spring, shifting from a nation characterized by free education, gender equality, accessible healthcare, extensive irrigation infrastructure, and the assurance of housing as a fundamental human right (Gwaambuka, 2016). Presently, Libya stands as a war-torn territory occupied by two dysfunctional states, posing a grave threat to both their populations and

neighboring nations. Therefore, comprehending the intricacies of conflict resolution in Libya is not merely an academic exercise but a vital resource for those endeavoring to navigate the complex Libyan crisis with diverse strategies for mitigation.

In its pursuit of viable mitigation strategies, this paper endeavors to address the fundamental question of why achieving a resolution for the ongoing Libyan conflict appears so elusive. Within the answers that this paper will proffer lies the potential for formulating recommendations that may pave the way towards stability in Libya.

## Solidarity map and conflict escalation

The West appears to have not heeded the lessons from its involvement in Afghanistan, where supporting Jihadist factions against the former USSR ultimately resulted in religious radicalization and plunged the country into a regressive state reminiscent of medieval times. This same pattern repeated itself in 2011 when the willingness to back any group, irrespective of their ideological leanings, to overthrow Gaddafi led to a situation where Islamist and Jihadist organizations found a foothold in North Africa. Following the NATO-backed invasion of Libya by various armed militias, the nation witnessed the emergence of the Interim Government of National Accord (GNA), which included allies such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi militias, and various Jihadist affiliates (Mezran, 2021). During the 2012 parliamentary elections in Libya, secular independent factions united under the National Forces Alliance secured 64 seats. Meanwhile, the Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party gained 34 seats, alongside numerous independent sympathizers. Additionally, Salafi candidates secured 27 seats. However, there was little collaboration within the Islamist factions themselves, and they also failed to cooperate with the already fragmented secular and independent parliamentary bloc (Ibid). In the post-Gaddafi era, Libya's representatives grappled with fractured national unity, where each group exhibited solidarity confined to its own faction. This divisive scenario fueled confrontations among these groups, ultimately leading to a fragile government. Solidarity emerges as a pivotal asset in conflicts, as cohesive groups are better equipped for mobilization and effective engagement (Collins, 2012, p. 2). At the foundational level of the conflict in post-Gaddafi Libya, conditions were ripe for escalation. Scholars highlight elements such as group solidarity, a readiness for self-sacrifice, divisive rhetoric and symbols, a sense of mutual threat, and shared objectives through collective actions as crucial factors in shaping a conflict-prone environment (Collins, 2012, p. 3). Applying this perspective to Libya's political landscape post-2012, what emerged was a shift from national solidarity to group solidarity, with divisions manifesting within both Islamist and secular factions. The willingness to make sacrifices aligned with the Jihad concept, shared by Salafi groups and the Muslim Brotherhood alike. This environment fostered a sense of threat among both Islamists and secular members of parliament, leading each group to direct their actions against the other. Ironically, the 200 members of parliament tasked with establishing the pillars of democracy and national unity inadvertently formed the core of a conflict that would intensify over time.

The breakdown of the reconstruction efforts in Libya, primarily caused by divisive partisan politics, resulted in a significant decline in voter turnout, plummeting from 61% to 42% during the 2014 elections. In the 2012 elections, the Muslim Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party secured 34 seats, with Salafi

groups winning 27 seats. In contrast, in the 2014 elections, the Brotherhood managed to secure only 25 seats out of the 200 available, while Salafi groups saw a notable decrease in their representation (Mezran, 2021). The House of Representatives (RoH) found itself under scrutiny in 2014, facing criticism from both secular politicians, who alleged connections to extremist elements, and Salafi groups, who questioned its adherence to Islamic principles. This same year witnessed the infiltration of ISIS into Libyan territories, leading to the expulsion of secular factions from Tripoli by various Islamist groups. Concurrently, General Khalifa Haftar launched "Operation Dignity" with the aim of eradicating Jihadist organizations and all forms of terrorism and extremism, leading the Libyan National Army (LNA) in the eastern region (Ibid). As conflicts intensify, group solidarity and ideological polarization play a pivotal role in mobilizing material resources for committing atrocities, expelling neutral parties, and seeking both domestic and foreign alliances (Collins, 2012, p. 8). In 2014, the Libyan conflict reached a critical juncture characterized by mounting tensions between Islamist forces in the west of the country and General Haftar's faction in the east.

Division and occasional clashes persisted until October 2020, when military delegates from the LNA and pro-GNA armed forces inked a ceasefire accord in Geneva. This agreement pledged to remove foreign mercenaries and restore access to closed transit routes along the front lines (Reuters, 2021). Libya's electoral commission initiated the registration of presidential candidates, with the anticipated first round scheduled for December 24, followed by a second-round runoff and parliamentary elections set to commence 52 days later (Ibid). The observed reduction in tension can be elucidated through the application of William Zartman's "ripeness" theory, which consists of four key elements: a mutually damaging stalemate (MHS), the presence of a recent or impending catastrophe, the perception of a viable resolution, and the presence of a credible spokesperson (Frank, 2015, p. 116). After enduring seven years of relentless conflict, with casualties among both military and civilian populations, and with foreign support seemingly prolonging the war indefinitely, the Libyan crisis has now transitioned into a de-escalation phase. This phase raises the hope of achieving fair presidential and parliamentary elections in 2022, which, if successful, could usher in a long-awaited era of peace and stability for the country.

## Foreign intervention

A proxy conflict emerged in Libya when various foreign nations began to intervene in the ongoing strife to safeguard their ideological and economic concerns. In Western Libya, the Al-Sarraj administration, endorsed by the United Nations and Western nations such as the United States, primarily leans on support from Turkey, Qatar, and Italy. On the other hand, in Eastern Libya, General Haftar garners backing from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Russia, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and France, as reported by Weise in 2020. It is comprehensible why Islamists might find Western support plausible, given the historical instances of Western nations collaborating with Islamism and even Jihadism in pursuit of their critical interests. This cooperation has been evident in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Conversely, it is also understandable why countries that have traditionally opposed Islamism would extend their support to General Haftar. For instance, Egypt took a strong stance against the Muslim Brotherhood following the assassination of President Sadat, while Russia confronted Jihadism in Chechnya.

These foreign powers, knowingly or unknowingly, contributed to the escalation of conflict in Libya, leaving behind a complex web of armed groups that pose threats to both domestic and regional security. According to Federica Saini Fasanotti, even though the ceasefire agreement, inked between Libya's conflicting factions in October 2020, has created an opening for United Nations-supported political negotiations, enduring socio-political tensions that have been intensified by foreign players continue to present a significant hurdle to diplomatic resolutions. Furthermore, Fasanotti noted that the recently appointed U.N. Special Representative for Libya, Jan Kubis, is confronted with an exceedingly challenging set of responsibilities (Feltman, et al. 2021). Pavel Baev argues that Russia's utilization of the Wagner mercenaries, primarily funded by the UAE, reveals its intent to manipulate the conflict to serve its own interests instead of seeking an end to the war (Ibid). However, when General Haftar laid siege to Tripoli and Turkey chose to support the besieged Government of National Accord (GNA) in early 2020, the previously halted offensive transformed into a chaotic withdrawal. This led to an informal agreement between Russia and Turkey that halted hostilities and permitted the Russian fighter squadron deployed to offer air support to the Wagner forces, who maintained control over multiple oil fields, to remain inactive (Ibid). Invoking Zartman's "ripeness" theory, which characterizes the mutually hurting stalemate as the moment when conflicting parties perceive it to be in their best interest to engage in negotiations, this juncture in the Libyan conflict proxy war occurred when Russian-backed forces and Western-backed forces reached a standstill during the siege of Tripoli.

By late 2018, Libyan and international leaders convened in Italy with the aim of resolving the political impasse. While all parties appeared to endorse a U.N. proposal for elections, the proliferation of weaponry and organized crime inflicted damage on the Libyan economy (Rowan, 2019). In 2021, the House of Representatives (HoR) approved a second law concerning parliamentary elections, and the electoral commission began the process of registering candidates, including those for the first round of presidential elections, followed by the second round 52 days later (Reuters, 2021). However, due to disputes surrounding election rules, the eligibility of key candidates, and the future powers of the incoming president and parliament, the elections were postponed to 2022 (Al Jazeera, 2021). In early 2022, interim Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah called for the establishment of a constitution before proceeding with the delayed presidential and parliamentary elections (France 24, 2022). Among the notable presidential candidates, apart from independent contenders, are interim Prime Minister Abdulhamid, General Haftar, and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, the son of former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. Presently, while some pockets controlled by Islamists experience reduced violence, political divisions persist, primarily between Haftar and the Government of National Accord (GNA), as optimism remains for future constitutional agreements and the conduct of democratic elections.

## Methodology and theoretical perspectives

### *Methodology*

This qualitative research employs a multifaceted approach to comprehensively investigate the intricate dynamics of the Libyan conflict. The study is underpinned by a constructivist perspective, which emphasizes the significance of ideational

factors shaped by historical and social constructs in understanding the behavior of political actors in international relations (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001).

### *Literature review*

To contextualize the research, the study draws on a range of conflict theories, including primordialism, instrumentalism, and Edward Azar's theory of protracted social conflict, as well as the constructivist approach.

- Primordialism is examined as it focuses on the role of kinship within ethnic groups, positing that these familial ties foster a sense of family resemblance among group members (Bin Mohamad, 2015, p. 89). This perspective suggests that tribalism, rooted in strong familial bonds, may have contributed to divisions among Libyans.
- Instrumentalism is explored, which underscores the influence of community leaders, not necessarily connected by blood, who utilize their cultural groups as platforms for mass mobilization (Ibid). This perspective helps shed light on the role of leaders in the Libyan conflict and their ability to galvanize support across ideological lines.
- Edward Azar's theory of protracted social conflict is considered, positing that ethnic conflicts often manifest as violent struggles by communal groups seeking fundamental necessities such as security, recognition, inclusion, equitable access to political institutions, and economic participation (Bin Mohamad, 2015, p. 90). However, this theory's applicability to the Libyan conflict is questioned given the unique nature of the conflict, which does not neatly fit within an ethnic context or as a result of community marginalization.

### *Research approach*

The research primarily adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth document analysis, interviews with key informants, and content analysis of media sources to construct a nuanced understanding of the Libyan conflict. This comprehensive approach allows for the exploration of ideational factors, historical context, and social constructs that shape the conflict.

### *Rationale*

The choice of a constructivist perspective aligns with the research's overarching aim to delve beyond material factors and one-dimensional explanations, such as primordialism and instrumentalism. By focusing on the role of ideational factors, the research seeks to illuminate the importance of a shared Libyan perception that embracing democratic principles is essential for resolving the conflict and advancing the nation.

This research methodology is designed to provide a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the Libyan conflict, with a particular focus on the role of ideational factors within a constructivist framework. Through rigorous data collection and analysis, the study aims to contribute valuable insights into the dynamics of the conflict and the potential pathways towards resolution.

## Conclusion and recommendations

In summary, this paper has explored the complexities surrounding the ongoing conflict in Libya and identified several critical factors hindering the attainment of a viable resolution. The sudden collapse of the Gaddafi regime created a power vacuum, leading to the proliferation of various armed groups and the intervention of foreign powers with vested interests. Traditional conflict analysis theories like primordialism and instrumentalism fall short in explaining the root causes of this conflict, highlighting the need for a broader constructivist perspective.

This constructivist viewpoint aligns with the Libyan situation and offers a potential pathway towards resolution. The removal of Gaddafi was made possible by the shared ideational construct among anti-Gaddafi factions, emphasizing the necessity of regime change. To achieve a lasting resolution, Libyan factions must now unite around an ideational construct that prioritizes reconstruction, democratization, and modernization as integral components of the national project.

While foreign powers have exacerbated the conflict, material resource mobilization alone cannot determine the fate of a resolution. However, these material factors do influence the formation of the crucial ideational construct. Building on this analysis, several recommendations are proposed:

1. Foreign powers involved in Libya should engage in diplomatic negotiations through Libyan institutions, utilizing treaties and agreements instead of resorting to proxy wars.
2. The United Nations, leveraging its existing institutions, should provide Libya with access to the necessary resources for development and modernization programs.
3. The international community should actively promote and support fair elections while endorsing governments that uphold human rights and ensure political and economic participation for all Libyans.
4. A comprehensive plan should be devised by the international community to disarm all militias and establish a unified national army.
5. Religious and other forms of extremism should be unequivocally prohibited from the political landscape in Libya.

These recommendations aim to foster the development of the essential ideational construct, paving the way for a sustainable and permanent resolution to the Libyan conflict.

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