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Now is the time to re-start and strengthen the dialogue in Libya

By Jean-Yves Ollivier

In Libya we have to surmount two obstacles which are blocking efforts to make progress. The first – that everything has already been tried, without success; the second – that in the middle of a pandemic, now is not the moment to try. Paradoxically the opposite is true.

Without wishing to diminish the efforts which have been made to drag Libya back from the brink, not everything has been tried. On the contrary, the international community has repeated two mistakes. First, naivete – the belief that by bringing together the two protagonists, the government of national unity, recognised by the UN but weak, on one side and on the other Marshall Haftar, the strong man who is trying to extend his control over the whole country, they can come to an agreement. Why when they are fighting each other on the ground would they make peace just because they find themselves abroad and someone asks them to shake hands in front of the television cameras?

Second, inertia. We all know that since the fall and the death of Gadhafi Libya has been transformed into a regional battlefield. Rivals all around the Mediterranean and the Middle East face off against each other by proxy - Turkey, Egypt and the UAE are the leaders among a dozen countries who are testing their strength without risking direct confrontation with each other. Libya's enormous riches are also tempting them. Either way, the Libyans are no longer the protagonists in the conflict that is taking place on their soil, but they are still the victims. Meanwhile the international community covers itself in hypocrisy. It calls on the belligerents to end the hostilities to salve its conscience but continues to throw fuel on the flames.

The most recent half measure: on 1 April the EU's launched the naval operation Irini ("peace" in Greek) to ensure the embargo on the import of arm into Libya is respected. However, as is well known, it is being violated by Turkey. Now Turkey is sheltering 3-4 million refugees who dream of coming to Europe. Ankara knows what to do to make sure Europe looks the other way. And from a Turkish perspective, it has good reason for acting as it does. While the EU patrols the Mediterranean, arms and weapons from the UAE continue to reach Libya by air and overland via Egypt.

I hear the objection: if the international community chooses not to see what would otherwise oblige it to act, how can we hope for any concerted action in the middle of the coronavirus crisis. The reply: it is precisely because there is no hope of a deus ex machina - whether that be France, Italy, the EU, the US, Russia or the UN - ready to intervene in an impartial manner to bring an end to the conflict that one can bring about peace. How? By giving Libyans their country back and letting them conduct a patient and inclusive dialogue among themselves.

This is what the African Union proposes to do. The aim is to save lives and allow Libya to begin the process of reconstruction. If consensus is built on three key objectives – patriotism, peace, reconstruction – all those who would interfere from outside will find the doors closed to them. No one will any longer take up the torches held out by foreign countries to set Libya ablaze.

This is not wishful thinking. In May 2018, with the support of the AU, the Brazzaville Foundation organised at Dakar an unprecedented meeting between Libyans, including some who led the 2011 revolution and figures from Gadhafi's former regime. Without preconditions and with no-one excluded, they started to talk to each other. It was difficult and, to begin with, extremely tense. But

meeting in the same room without a pre-arranged agenda, they agreed not to focus on past wrongs or the current conflict, but instead to look at certain principles - a unified country, a government and an army responsible to the people – as basis for a shared future. They honoured the victims, each their own, in searching for a narrative which would allow them to believe that they had not died for nothing.

It is urgent to restart that dialogue and to strengthen it. For that there are two prerequisites. First, a willingness to move forward step by step, at a pace which the Libyans themselves determine, starting with small meetings and variable geometry, before moving to broaden the circle and, when the time is right, convene a major forum for a truly inclusive dialogue. The AU has expressed its willingness to go down this path and the Brazzaville Foundation is ready to act as the linchpin.

The other indispensable prerequisite for opening the space for this inter-Libyan dialogue is the support of the UN Security Council. Unfortunately, the current situation invites just such an appeal by the UN. Far from stopping the fighting, Covid 19 has led to a resumption of hostilities around Tripoli as the combatants try to force the issue. Despair is at the gates of the city. Already trapped between a rock and a hard place, Tripoli's two million inhabitants now also risk suffering the ravages of the pandemic.

Confined at my home, I cannot forget them. Recently, I have been listening to Beethoven's 16th string quartet known as "the song of peace". Written in the midst of family problems and worries about money, the manuscript of this, his last work includes this injunction from the composer: Es muss Sein ("It must be"). For Libya, too, it must be.

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