



Peacebuilding and reconciliation in Libya: What role for Italy?

Roundtable event
Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Bologna
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Roundtable report

Summary

- Despite the insecurity in the country, Libyan civil society organizations (CSOs) remain active in promoting conflict resolution and peacebuilding. However, Libyan CSOs defy traditional Western frameworks, as they are for the most part informal and operate locally.
- There is a general lack of trust, on the part of ordinary Libyan citizens and communities, in national institutions and national political processes. Where successful, CSO-led initiatives have therefore stayed away from politics and relied on the reputation and respect of relatively autonomous or informal leaders, such as businessmen, young activists and community elders.
- There are several key challenges to promoting peacebuilding in Libya, including the difficulty of access and communication (linked to insecurity and poor or damaged infrastructure), the low legitimacy of national politicians and traditional powerholders, and disillusionment with international actors.
- At the same time, there are also some opportunities. There are, for example, issues linked to the constitutional reform process, such as universal rights, which could be used to bring people together, build confidence between communities, and create concrete dividends for peace. Working with communities locally (and away from national politics) has also led to important agreements around peace and reconciliation.
- Overall, however, there is a need for stronger and better coordination. There are significant gaps in this respect among donors and NGOs, and a strong sense of disillusionment among Libyans on the role that the international community can play.

About the Agency for Peacebuilding

AP is a non-profit association whose mission is to promote conditions that can enable the resolution of conflict, reduce violence and contribute to a durable peace across Europe, its neighbourhood and the world. The overall vision of AP is of a world where conflicts can be transformed—through the research of solutions that are innovative, non-violent and sustainable—into opportunities to promote cooperation that is based on an open and honest confrontation.

Recommendations and way ahead

The roundtable discussion produced a number of different recommendations about how to further explore and promote peacebuilding in Libya. These are presented below.

To international organizations (IOs) working in Libya:

- **Support peacebuilding and reconciliation at the local level** focusing on specific, concrete and locally driven processes and solutions that avoid the national-level political discourse.
- **Identify the relevant local actors working in Libya, the real capacity of these groups and their priorities.** IOs should interact with local actors but also be aware of their role within their communities and of the subsequent perceptions that joint activities could generate.
- **Improve the analysis of the Libyan conflict and use this as a starting point to ensure that standards of *Do No Harm* and conflict sensitivity are always met.** Many of the challenges identified in how IOs are supporting peacebuilding are due to gaps in the analysis or understanding of the Libyan conflict. This is characterized by ethnic, political, geographic and socio-economic factors that are not yet sufficiently integrated into the design of humanitarian, development or peacebuilding interventions. IOs should therefore improve their analysis.
- **Improve coordination.** IOs should better define their respective intervention areas and avoid duplication. While coordination mechanisms will continue to be limited insofar as the Libyan government lacks a consolidated presence across the country and specific capacities, governmental and non-governmental agencies should seek to better coordinate and share information both among themselves and with affected communities.
- **International actors should engage with informal CSOs and influential community leaders.** In this phase, IOs (including donor governments and NGOs) should seek to support initiatives that are locally owned and removed from the political scene, as these have proven to be the most effective to build confidence among ordinary Libyan citizens and communities.

To Italian actors working in or on Libya, including the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation:

- **Convene a larger working group for actors engaged in or on Libya.** For this roundtable AP has identified the main governmental and non-governmental actors currently working in or on Libya, all of which have expressed an interest in having a forum to share information and engage with others. Convening a larger working group could therefore be the starting point for a more structured involvement.
- **Apply a holistic approach to the Libyan context through the development of context-specific programmes that fully integrate conflict sensitivity.** This approach could support effective cooperation and avoid triggering local conflicts.
- **Allocate specific resources for supporting CSO-led initiatives on peacebuilding and reconciliation in Libya.** Development aid and diplomatic efforts risk being in vain if they are not integrated with a genuine bottom-up process of peacebuilding and reconciliation, which can generate concrete dividends, in relation to peace and stability, for communities and citizens.

Background and objectives of the roundtable

The Agency for Peacebuilding (AP) organized the roundtable with the goal of starting a constructive dialogue among different actors that are working to support conflict resolution or peacebuilding in Libya. The roundtable was thus an opportunity to share information, lessons learned and practical examples, and also to identify potential opportunities for collaboration among participants.

The rationale for the event came from the experience of AP in similar initiatives, which sought to bring together representatives from government and non-government organizations to compare notes,

so to speak, and coordinate efforts. The experience gained in fragile and transitional contexts over the last 20 years demonstrates in fact that in post-conflict scenarios this type of collaboration can be crucial in order to successfully promote democratization, reconciliation and human rights, all of which are key aspects for sustainable development and peace.

The specific objectives of this roundtable were two: first, to promote a direct exchange between representatives from civil society and officials from Italian agencies working, or interested in working, in Libya; and secondly to contribute to improving the effectiveness of Italian policies vis-à-vis Libya, in particular around conflict management, peacebuilding and civil society.

The following sections summarize and highlight the main points discussed during the roundtable. Comments and inputs are not attributed to any participant, however, as the event took place under *Chatham House* rules.

What does civil society mean in Libya today?

A first point that roundtable participants highlighted was that the very meaning of civil society, in the Libyan context, needs to be carefully explored. As in other countries undergoing a transition (the example of Tunisia comes to mind), civil society can appear to grow as a very dynamic sector. The boom of civil society organizations (CSOs) does not automatically reflect greater citizen participation, however, nor is it often sustainable, at least on its own.

This certainly appears to be the case in Libya. Following the 2011 revolution and the fall of the Gheddafi regime, the country saw a proliferation of CSOs, mostly promoting women, minorities and youth rights. But this did not last: due to the resurgence of armed conflict in 2013 and 2014, a significant decrease in the number of CSOs, a change in the original framework for how civil society works in the country and a general retreat to the private sphere have taken place. In addition, the deep fragmentation and the existence of several groups fighting for space, power and legitimacy has reduced the scope of operativity for Libyan activists. Consequently, today CSOs in the country have to operate in a very polarised environment and in shrinking spaces due to security reasons.

Furthermore, civil society in Libya today does not follow the model of Western civil society. Libyan CSOs are often not officially organized or registered. Most of them are in fact informal associations in nature, working primarily within neighbourhoods. Additionally, the civil society space has started to accommodate new and less traditional actors, such as:

- Businessmen who have the capacity and influence to provide specific services to the community, such as transportation and electricity.
- Technicians who have direct connections to the local population. These include engineers, who generally have a good reputation because they provide concrete solutions for technical problems and can, based on this, assume the role of trusted mediators.
- Social leaders, including community notables or elders (but not always tribal ones), young activists and representatives from rural communities, who can work with autonomy. These are people who enjoy the respect of the communities in which they work, and are closely tied to them; and, some cases, who do not have an affiliation to the political factions involved in ongoing national processes, including around the Government of National Accord (GNA).

Finally, the discussion also focused on two ambiguous figures: ‘strong (or big) men’ and local authority representatives. These two groups share the characteristic of having access to resources (both political and financial); how much leverage and standing they have vis-à-vis communities was, however, a point where participants diverged. For local authorities, there is now also the added problem that in some communities, several sets of officials might exist: in some municipalities, there are those who were elected during the transition, but in others no elections were ever held; and in Eastern Libya, mayors are now being appointed by local military councils.

Overall, the picture described during the roundtable was one of a dynamic and active civil society, in spite of the many challenges related to security, capacity and resources. It also appears that the *most*

effective efforts by CSOs in Libya today are ones that are informal, very localized and led by people who are not directly involved in official political dialogues.

Peacebuilding perspectives in Libya

Since 2011, the political situation in Libya has been characterized by a rupture of the social contract, a loss of credibility by institutions at the national level and a communication gap between the central government, led by an elite with political and economic power, and communities and municipalities in the periphery. There was a general agreement that, currently, a cohesive peacebuilding agenda is weak—both in Libya and among international actors.

During the roundtable, participants identified the following main challenges to creating an effective and inclusive peacebuilding process:

- Access to and between communities is very limited. It is literally very difficult to travel across the country, because both of insecurity and lack of infrastructure. Communication is also very difficult and unavailable in some areas of Libya. All of this makes inter-community work very difficult if not impossible.
- Lack of trust in the high-level political dialogue mediated by the UN Special Representative. Ordinary Libyans have very little faith in national institutions and also in the official dialogue processes that are currently ongoing—and which are, to this day, fully supported by the international community. Yet, and paradoxically, the most successful reconciliation initiatives, today, are those that have little to nothing to do with national mediation efforts.
- Ambiguous legitimacy of traditional powerbrokers. As mentioned before, some traditional powerbrokers do not enjoy strong legitimacy, which has the risk of undermining the effectiveness of those peacebuilding initiatives that are, to this day, being supported locally, for example through municipalities.
- Competition over scarce financial resources and poor coordination. Those resources made available for peacebuilding, in a context characterized by the above-mentioned challenges, has at times increased competition between actors and dis-incentivized coordination.
- Lack of trust in the international community, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Finally, Libyan communities and citizens have developed a level of distrust for NGOs and the international community writ large, specifically in relation to the unmet expectations following the fall of the Gheddafi regime, when international actors swooped in to the country, but failed to support sustainable initiatives.

In spite of the challenges just described, participants identified several successful examples of peacebuilding, as well as other opportunities to support such type of work in the future.

A positive experience for example is the Libyan Social Dialogue Initiative. In 2014, a group of young Libyan activists launched a process of local dialogue, receiving some assistance from international scholars. This process ran informally and was separate from the political mediation process that the UN promoted at the end of the same year. The youth group was then supported in organizing an alternative conference with local influential leaders from across Libya, which aimed at putting pressure on the UN-based process to be more effective. This meeting showed how civil society could contribute to building up solutions in relation to peacebuilding. It also led to several other meetings, in 2015, which focused on resolving the local conflict in the Nafusa Mountains.

During the current phase of high political polarization, focusing on specific, concrete and localized solutions and facilitating mediation at the local level seem to be more effective than aiming for a broader reconciliation at the societal level. Several other examples of successful peacebuilding were discussed, which highlighted that avoiding links to the official political scene, fixing criteria of participation so as not to involve political figures and focussing on reconciliation between local factions are all crucial steps for success. Peacebuilding in this phase can contribute to maintaining stability and producing peace dividends in terms of people's trust, which are necessary to start building a wider reconciliation process.

The constitutional drafting process was also mentioned as a potential entry point to support peacebuilding and reconciliation. Specifically, working on (or through) the general legal framework could promote dialogue between divided communities on some topics, such as universal rights, which are seen as apolitical and in the interest of everyone.

Another successful approach consists in involving groups that have been excluded from official political processes from the beginning of the transition, as well as other activists and community representatives who have good standing with ordinary Libyans. Establishing channels and providing spaces for communication among these individuals, and the groups that they represent, would represent a huge improvement on the status quo and have the potential to increase confidence necessary to reach agreement on topics central to peace in Libya. In this context, the role of peacebuilding processes would be to help local actors already engaged in mediation efforts to identify tools to implement what they agreed and thus create concrete peace dividends for all Libyans.

The role of international organizations

Since mid-2014, the majority of international organizations (IOs) and NGOs that had been providing assistance to Libya had to leave the country due to the resurgence of political violence and the deterioration of the security environment. As a consequence they lost touch with the situation on the ground, significantly impairing the effectiveness of the initiatives that they supported. However, roundtable participants tended to agree that even before the latest crisis, efforts to promote peacebuilding, reconciliation and stabilization have been characterized by a general lack of coordination at the level of both strategies and programmes.

At the strategic level, the international community has remained adamant about its support to the national political dialogue and, since December 2015, to the GNA. This decision has, however, undermined, at least in part, the ability of IOs to promote successful peacebuilding since, as it was noted above, national institutions and processes largely lack the trust of ordinary citizens and communities. It has also affected the ability of NGOs to act as a bridge between the international community and Libyan society, as donors have been concerned that the initiatives that they fund are seen as supporting the GNA and the UN-backed high-level dialogue process.

International actors are also not responding sufficiently well to the complexity of the Libyan conflict. The fact that this has multiple layers (based on ethnic, geographic, political and socio-economic differences) is not generally reflected in the agendas of IOs. As a result, practical decisions can often undermine peacebuilding objectives and have arguably even led to harm being caused as a result. For example, several IOs continue to support local municipalities across Libya, as part of a commitment to decentralization that was made before 2014. These initiatives have been problematic, however, first because they have tended to favour those municipalities backing the GNA, and secondly because they focus on the internal dynamics of communities rather than on the relationships between communities across the country.

At the programmatic level, these challenges are often compounded. Coordination mechanisms are weak or absent, leaving NGOs and donors to design initiatives that duplicate each other's efforts. And in launching new programmes, IOs have also tended to disregard what had been done before, or the work that informal actors—such as those mentioned in the first section—have built with minimal resources. This has contributed to increasing perceptions, on the part of communities and ordinary citizens, that the international community does not genuinely take in to account the needs and interests of Libyans.

Overall, it is clear that coordination is a critical gap and that it is hampering even those few peacebuilding efforts that are ongoing in Libya today. Clarifying which governmental and non-governmental actors are currently present in the country, sharing their agenda and priorities and improving the communication among them appears imperative if efforts to promote peace, reconciliation and stability are to be more effective in the future.