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What is really going on in Libya?

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Ever since the fall of the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, Libya has been living in a state of 'multiple sovereignty' which will not end without casualties

The situation in Libya is a complicated and confusing one. It is complicated due to the unique nature of the “state” in Libya, and it is confusing because the map of political powers in Libya is highly unstable and political power-dynamics are constantly revised.

But regardless of the complex details that eventually make up the present picture, the growth of Libya as a regional and an international threat is becoming hard to ignore. Both Libya’s neighbors and the international community have shown increasing interest in what is going on in Libya, especially since the election of the new parliament and the beginning of a dual-state situation there.

However, the growing regional and international interest in Libya will not change the inevitable course of events Libya has to pass through in its post-revolutionary phase. Libyans today are paying the price of Gaddafi’s 42-year monopoly on power and the recurrent failure of the various post-revolutionary governments to assume legitimate political sovereignty.

After the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya had to face the absence of a “state” in the institutional sense of the word, and the state of political vacuum caused by Gaddafi’s totalitarian regime.

The National Transitional Council which assumed power after the fall of Gaddafi could not emerge as a sovereign political entity. Although the council enjoyed tangible domestic support and popularity as well as considerable international recognition, it was never sufficiently powerful or resourceful to face the several challenges in the post-Gaddafi Libya.

The absence of an institutional state and the relative weakness of Libyan political elites gave birth to new power centers, mainly non-institutional and illegitimate entities. Whether on religious, tribal, ideological or geographical basis, various militias emerged as influential political actors in Libya.

Neither the National Transitional Council nor the governments that followed were able to confront the militias or to declare monopoly over violence and means of coercion. Therefore, Libya remained until today in a state of “multiple sovereignty”. And in order to avoid violent confrontation between the different political actors, an underground dynamic was created between the legitimate political entities and the various militias; a dynamic that ensured mutual interests and peaceful coexistence between the legitimate political authority and the different illegitimate entities. It was this “dynamic” that put state-owned structures like airports and oil refineries under the control of militias without much objection from the government.

However, like other Arab Spring countries, the political clash between Islamists and nationalists in Libya was inevitable. But due to the nature of the “state” in Libya, specifically when it comes to the state’s coercive capabilities, this clash was much delayed. In other words, what we are witnessing in Libya right now is not the beginning of a civil war or a process of division, it is rather a struggle for survival between the different political entities that could not maintain the state of coexistence they had going since the fall of Gaddafi. Both regional and international interests require the presence of a sovereign authority in Libya, a single government that enjoys political legitimacy and coercive capabilities.

The nationalist front in Libya is indeed doing its best to emerge as this single authority, and the first step to establish that was making the connection between a politically legitimate entity (the Tobroq Parliament and its government) and a military capable body (the Haftar militias and the resurrected Libyan National Army). Unfortunately, ending the state of multiple sovereignty will not be realized without paying a price, sadly one that will be paid in bullets and blood.

Libya could be on its way to end the state of political chaos it has been living under since the fall of the Gaddafi regime, but it will only be wishful thinking to assume that this state will end without violent confrontations and casualties between warring entities.