



## **SAGEZLI: “THE NEW SYSTEM IN LIBYA WOULD BE A DECENTRALIZED SYSTEM WITHIN A UNITARY STATE.”**

Mustafa Al Sagezli



*Mustafa Al Sagezli graduated from the Computer Science at the Utah University in USA in 1987. He had 13-week training at the London School of Economics on ‘Leadership and Public Management’. He started his master’s education in 2015 at the New York University and now he is in the process of writing his thesis on ‘Economic Reintegration of Ex-Combatants’. Having worked on information technology for years, he has currently been working as the general manager of the Libyan Program for the Reintegration and Development since 2011. As the founder and manager of the program which has 31 branches and 380 staff, Mr. Sagezli established a large database based on the interviews with 162,000 ex-combatants. Mr. Sagezli speaks fluent English and French in addition to his native language, Arabic.*

**ORSAM:** On 17 December 2015, the UN-sponsored Sukhairat declaration officially ended the political and military infighting in Libya. The deal envisioned the formation of a national unity government in Libya and the Presidency Council was given the task of selecting the ministers of the national unity government within 30 days, which was going to be followed by the endorsement of the names by the Parliament in Tobruk. However, this has not happened, yet. The Presidency Council announced the names for the national unity government, but the two parliaments, Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) and Tripoli-based General National Congress (GNC) still remains divided over the issue. Could you please elaborate on what happened after 2011 and why there are two competing parliaments in Libya today and why is there an enduring rivalry between them?

**Mr. Sagezli:** It is a bit complicated, but let me explain it in a philosophical way. Usually when you bring down a rotten building, you need to build it with your partners. You should have a vision and a plan and everybody should agree on the plan. In Libya, what happened is that we brought down the system. We were very united during the revolution around one goal, and we got rid of Qaddafi in eight months. However, we had 42 years of Qaddafi's rule, no infrastructure, a terrible education system, thousands of political prisoners, divisions among tribes, and destruction of the army. In such a state, when you take out the dictator, it's like taking the cover off the pot. Therefore, when we toppled Qaddafi, we had to tackle with the challenge of rebuilding Libya.

After the revolution, we started the democratic process to rebuild the country, but since then, the division started on how to rebuild Libya among different groups. Everybody had his own vision. There was

no united vision on rebuilding Libya, so the conflict started. It started as a political conflict between, for example, liberals, Muslim Brotherhood, federalists, and some tribal components. The conflict started politically as evident in the case of competition during the elections. The politicians competed with each other. The competition took place over the media. The problem emerged exactly when the political parties started coordinating with militias. To put it simply, divisions started as a political conflict through media, through elections and then by time, each political party and each component of society linked itself to a militia. When the conflict got more and more intense, it was translated into military fights. This is exactly what happened in Libya.

In July 2012, we had a successful election and in the end, we had our new GNC. In 2013, the political conflict became very strong. We witnessed divisions in the government on the question

of who the Prime minister should be. We had the Liberal Coalition of Mahmoud Jibril on the one side and we had Justice and Reconstruction Party on the other side and we had the federalists in the east who wanted Libya to be a federalist state. Each one of them started opposing to the other. Then the militias on the ground, despite not having political representation, became affiliated to political parties throughout the time, and then the conflict started. For instance, we had the Zintan region affiliated with the Liberal Coalition of Mahmoud Jibril. Other groups such as the Islamists were affiliated to Justice and Reconstruction Party. The federalists also had their own militias. There also some regions like Tebu or Tuareg in the south and they had their own forces. All these developments led to conflicts and fights among these groups throughout the year 2013 as well as the unrest and division within the army. In the end, we had a divided Libyan army.

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The main problem, in fact, has been that we did not have a strong institution. Qaddafi did not leave us strong institutions. So the institutions were divided. In February 2014, General Khalifa Haftar made a *coup d'etat* in Tripoli and he froze the constitution, and the congress. However, that coup attempt failed completely. What Haftar did

in May 2014 was to come to Benghazi and launch what he called the “Dignity War”. It was a war against terrorism. During 2013, there were many assassinations inside Benghazi especially against activists and some military and security officers remaining from the time of Qaddafi. People were not happy about those conditions, and people

were full of revenge and felt that the city was insecure. Haftar took advantage of this situation and started the Dignity Campaign in Benghazi.

During that time, there was another election for the HoR and everybody agreed on the election. Not many people showed up in the elections, but there was a problem between the old parliament and the new parliament. The new parliament did not want to be placed in Tripoli. It was supposed to be placed in Benghazi, but because of the conflict in Benghazi, 20 or 30 of the members of the parliament (MPs) took the new parliament to Tobruk. Then some of the MPs refused to be placed in Tobruk. Actually, the old parliament (GNC) did not hand the power over to the new parliament, and the division started from there. A few months later, in November 2014, the Libyan Supreme Court including some members of the GNC, declared the HoR in Tobruk as illegal and unconstitutional since the power was not

handed over to HoR. Then we had a new parliament in Tobruk which is considered illegitimate by the old parliament, GNC in Tripoli, and each parliament had its own government. Therefore, the division started between the east and the west. Even though many members of the government in the east are from the west and many members of the government in the west are from the east. The divisions started this way, but what made things worse was the campaign by Haftar, because it turned into a real war in Benghazi. It was considered as a counter-revolution, especially because it was supported by Egypt under Sisi. That counter-revolution attempt was a way of returning to military rule like that of Qaddafi. All in all, this is how things went wrong. The transformation of political conflict into a military conflict led to chaos in the country.

**As you mentioned about General Haftar, he is considered as a fault line in the**

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**efforts for the formation of the national army. First, can you clarify what is meant by the 'National Army' and then comment on what will happen to General Haftar and his forces after the formation of the National Army?**

The problem with the Libyan Agreement sponsored by the UN is that the agreement is not based on the real analysis of the situation of institutions in Libya, especially the military. Some clauses in the agreement are quite vague. The way Libyan military is described does not address the real issues and challenges. For instance, we have one chief of staff in the east and one in the west. Haftar is claiming that he is the commander of the military, but he is not accepted by the western side. We also have militias, but the agreement does not deal with these issues. In my opinion, a dialogue should have been conducted with the military groups and militias. In addition, part of the agreement

should have envisioned a road map for rebuilding the army.

During 2012-2013, there were many workshops and conferences about the Libyan army and after those, it was quite clear that we needed to rebuild the army. There was a well known paper by the UN, it was called "Towards a Defense White Paper", which in fact was a plan for rebuilding the Libyan army. However, the army was vaguely described in the plan. They assumed that we had a military as an institution, but in reality, neither we had it in the past nor we have it now. The issue of Haftar was also not addressed in the plan. They did not want to be involved in that problem, because they thought that they would divide the army into two parties, but again they delayed the problems. It was like they put land mines on the road of the new government. In the political agreement there was an article stating that all high-ranking military positions would be renamed and they have not done it yet,

because the way the Presidential Council was set up, the power is divided and it is hard to get consensus. Therefore, the Libyan Political Agreement was weak in analyzing the situation on the ground. It did not open the dialogue with militias and resulted in a lot of challenges for the government. I think the government can only succeed if it opens this dialogue with militias, find solutions to their problems, listen to their ambitions and fears, and work on how to reintegrate them and how to rebuild an army that is accepted by all Libyans so that it would be an army that will defend the people, an army that will not interfere in politics, an army that does not have a controversial leadership that is accepted from one side and refused by the other side.

**Libya's internationally recognized parliament was unable to hold a vote of confidence in the UN-backed unity government on 23 February 2016 because it**

**lacked a quorum. Therefore, the meeting was postponed. In addition, on 27 February, in Tripoli, the State Council, which was proposed by the Libyan Political Agreement, brokered by the UN, held a meeting. Then on 28 February, the President of Tobruk Parliament, Aqilah Saleh, met in Cairo with the head of the UN-backed Presidential Council, Fayiz Al-Serraj in presence of Martin Kobler, the UN envoy to Libya. What do you think about all these meetings and gatherings? Are they prone to bring in tangible results for the actualization of the national unity government in Libya?**

The real problem nowadays is that there is a division inside the parliament on the unity government. The people who are hard supporters of Haftar think that Haftar has a good chance to take over Benghazi. Ten days ago there was a strong offensive by Haftar against the revolutionaries in Benghazi and they think if Haftar takes over Benghazi,

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then he would advance to Tripoli and the whole balance of power will change, so they keep on delaying the formation of the unity government. They are saying it clearly, because they believe that a weak government supported by the UN without strong military support would not survive. Especially this government

has neither support in Tripoli nor strong support from Haftar, so they are trying to gain time, hoping that Haftar will take over Benghazi. However, the last offensive was quite strong and he got a lot of support even from the people who were with Qaddafi. Yet, he seems to have failed to control Benghazi



completely. Therefore, they are trying to delay the formation of the government.

Another news that I have been hearing for the last few days is that there will be this new Libyan-Libyan dialogue. Some people are saying that this UN path will lead to nowhere and there should a new Libyan-Libyan dialogue. They think that it is the way to achieve a unity government. Thus, it looks like the formation of the government will depend on if Haftar takes over Benghazi. In fact, his plan is to continue to reach Tripoli. Nevertheless, if Haftar fails, I think the people supporting him might find the option of the unity government as the only available option.

**Let's move on to the debates about federalism, which comes to the fore of the international agenda from time to time as long as the political situation is not completely settled and the unity government is not established in Libya. What would you say about this**

**debate? Do you think that Libya is evolving to a federal political structure as foreseen by the dominant perspective of federalism debate?**

Libya was established as a state in 1951 by King Idris as-Senussi. When the Libyan state was formed and gained independence after the war against Italy and World War I, it was divided into three regions; Cyrenaica in the east, Tripoli in the west and Fezzan in the south. When Libya gained its independence, it was a federal kingdom where there were three states and each state had its equal representation in the parliament and its own government. Then in 1963, Libya became a unitary state, it was no more a federalist country. During the time of Qaddafi, the power was centralized in Qaddafi's hand, and Qaddafi was in Tripoli. Therefore, many areas that were far from Tripoli lacked services, and power. People in the east felt that they were marginalized. However, it was only

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Qaddafi and his tribe, not the people in Tripoli, who benefited from the centralization of power in Tripoli. After the revolution in 2011, many people in Cyrenaica thought that we need a federalist state, because only in a federalist state 'the east' can benefit from its own wealth (it is rich in oil), develop its own state and ensure that there would be no negligence of 'the east' in the future.

For Libyans, decentralization in terms of administrating the regions is not an issue. On the other hand, the federalists in the east brought the idea of decentralization and politicized it as federalism, meaning the division of everything; the wealth, the power into three regions. For instance, they brought the idea of equal representation of three regions in the parliament even though the population in the west is much more than the east and the south, so this is where the conflict started again. The solution to for this problem would be decentralization which means instead

of everything centralized in the capital, we would have regions or provinces and each province would have its share of power, share of wealth like many decentralized regions, so development would be easier, and the services would be closer to the people. Decentralization would be a way to resolve the problems stemming from high centralization, and I think they took that into consideration in the new constitution. The new system in Libya would be a decentralized system within a unitary state.

**Another important issue that I'd like to discuss with you is the issue of ISIS/Daesh. It is discussed that there is an increasing presence of ISIS in Libya. In addition, Libya is also said to have become a hub for the smugglers and terrorists or in other words one of the centers of the global black market where weapon smuggling, human smuggling and radical extremism meet. Can you assess the**

**current situation in Libya in terms of terrorism and organized crime?**

During the 42 years of one man system, thousands of people, many of which were young, were sent into prisons. In one day, in the prison of Abu Salim, 1,200 people were slaughtered by Qaddafi, and this was the event, anniversary of which ignited the revolution in Libya. So events like this, and especially hitting hard on Islamists, made many of these young people turn into jihadists who thought that the only way to change Qaddafi regime could be by jihad. Therefore, the seeds were there from the time of Qaddafi. Besides, another issue turns out to be the access to Islamic knowledge. In 1970s Qaddafi closed the Islamic universities and cancelled the position of Mufti. This led to a gap in terms of access to Islamic knowledge, so where would young people get the basic Islamic knowledge? They would get it from tapes, later on from the internet, from anybody

who comes from Al-Qaida or from Afghanistan or whoever sends a statement through the media. The scholars were not able to interact with people, they were isolated. So we had this new generation of young people who learned Islam through media and tapes and extremist ideologies. Hence this is the background of the current situation in Libya. We could reintegrate these young people into the new society and give them opportunities or we could neglect them and then they will be attracted by these extremist movements and groups. For the two or three years after the revolution and the political conflicts, many of these young people turned out to be neglected. They had no possibility to join any state institutions like the army or police forces, so they got attracted to and recruited by extremist groups. Until the end of 2013, we did not hear of ISIS in Libya. We heard of ISIS right after Haftar started his campaign. Before that, we

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had extremist groups like Ansar Al Sharia.

I believe that ISIS is not only an extreme Islamist group, but I believe that ISIS has some affiliations with some intelligence agencies and is also financed internationally. When it comes to the reason why it did find ground in Libya is that the security situation in Libya is fragile, there are no well-established security institutions, and besides, the seeds of extremism were already sown in Libya as a result of the policies of the Qaddafi regime. Many young people thought that there was no project for a new state in Libya and the project of the so called "Islamic State" attracted them. Then, they joined ISIS. What is more, where ISIS is strong in Libya is Qaddafi's area, where most of the pro-Qaddafi forces are located. These people felt neglected by this revolution and they had desire for revenge against the revolution. By the way, they did not have weapons. They were disarmed because they belonged to

Qaddafi's tribe. Therefore, they found refuge in ISIS.

At the end of the day, ISIS took advantage of the security situation in Libya. The division inside Libya weakens the institutions. The weak institutions and the already present seeds of extremism led to the empowerment of extremist groups including ISIS. I believe that there is another reason for the spread of extremism in Libya, which is the return of Haftar. When he attacked Benghazi, he did not differentiate between extremists and revolutionaries. He attacked them both. This led to a coalition between revolutionaries and extremists, because they had a common enemy who would them all. And this was not good in countering violent extremism. In countering violent extremism, it is very important to have dialogue with the moderates to gain them.

Apart from that, I think that ISIS was made to counter the Arab Spring, but with studying the weaknesses of the Arab Spring. Arab Spring

came after decades of tyranny and oppression, but it had its weaknesses, such as the extremist element. The Arab Spring was not made by the Islamists; it was made by the people. But the extremist element was part of it. Normal people were the vast majority. There were liberals, it moderate Islamists, but also extremists. For example, in Libya, we were all united against Qaddafi, but then counter revolution began through ISIS. Many people believe that it is a conspiracy theory, but when you read the history, it is not a conspiracy theory. It happened in many countries. One of the weaknesses of our revolution was this extremist element, and counter-revolutionaries took advantage of it, and bring out ISIS. If you see Syria before ISIS, the revolution was about to take over Damascus, it was about to succeed. When ISIS came, everything fell apart. In Libya, things were going quite well when these extremist elements rose. For instance, there were strange

assassinations, two or three per day, in Benghazi and nobody knew who the assassins were. Everybody was pointing to the extremists, but nobody was caught. It was clear that there was another hand, like the professional intelligence associations outside Libya so that nobody could be caught as perpetrators.

There is ISIS in Derna and Sirte. We never thought that ISIS could find ground in Derna or Sirte. The people who kicked out ISIS from Derna were the revolutionaries. There is also a small group of ISIS in Sabratha and again it was kicked out and beaten by the revolutionaries. Until now Haftar has been fighting in Benghazi for 20 months. He concentrated on Benghazi which also has extremist components, but the main component is the revolutionaries, but he did not fight against them, he targeted revolutionaries like Assad in Syria. It is in the benefit of Assad that ISIS is there, because the main threat for Assad is the moderates,

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the Syrian opposition. Assad knows that the rest of the war will never let ISIS take over Damascus, so he feels safe as long as ISIS is there. About Libya, again I think, the only way to counter ISIS is to unite all the Libyan people, have one government, one army, and security institutions that all Libyans can accept. Then it will not take long to get rid of ISIS. The experience in Derna and Sabratha shows that it is very possible to get rid of ISIS, because it has no support from the society. Libyans, even Islamists, feel that ISIS is a conspiracy and they are willing to fight against it.

**What about the foreign military interventions? American warplanes bombed a seaside town in Libya on 19 February aiming to kill a militant commander linked to attacks on Western tourists. Few days later, it was on the news that the French Special Forces and intelligence commandos are engaged in covert operations against ISIS militants in**

**Libya in conjunction with the United States and Britain. The Western-led international community's sensitivity about ISIS and related radical extremist terrorists is compelling them to engage in counter-terrorism operations against these terrorists, but at the same time these missions or operations is said to widen the gap between American military operations and diplomatic efforts to bring peace and stability to a turbulent region. What do you think of the international involvement (predominantly the US and French) in Libya about countering radical extremists?**

I think the intervention without a unity government without united institutions in Libya, without bringing unity among the Libyans would not help at all. It will only make Libyans more divided. I can understand the worries of Europe because of the proximity of Libya to Europe, but again the real solution is to help Libyans to build

their institutions and maybe support Libyans with intelligence, with reconnaissance. When we have a secure Libya with its own institutions, I think we can tackle this problem and we can ask for help from abroad. But intervention with this chaotic situation will make things more chaotic.

**Last, but not the least, what would you say about Turkey's foreign policy towards Libya after the emergence of the two parliaments? And how do you think Turkey should proceed in its policies towards Libya?**

I think Turkey tried to be neutral after the emergence of the two parliaments in Libya. Turkey joined the international community in the process led by the UN. I cannot say Turkey has taken sides. HoR in Tobruk and Haftar are claiming that Turkey supports the Tripoli government, but it is not true. I know it for sure. However, what I feel is that Turkey is a bit hesitant in taking steps. I think

Turkey should and can play a more important role in Libya. I know that in 2014, Turkey sent an envoy to Tobruk and Tripoli, Mr. Emrullah İşler. It was a good step, to go to both sides, but it did not continue. Then Turkey became a part of the international community and UN dialogue.

Turkey has many cards in Libya. For instance; most of the Libyans injured from both sides went to Turkish hospitals. Turkey is one of the most important educational hubs for Libyans. Many Libyans go to Turkey for higher education. I know that many of our products are imported by Turkey. Turkish companies in the time of Qaddafi had huge contracts in Libya. And I think historically, even the tribes in the east had very good relations with Turkey. I think Turkey needs to have a vision when it comes to Libya. And it can have plans on how to help Libyans for mutual benefits, for partnership. Another way Turkey can help Libya, is in the arena of OIC. Turkey is quite strong in

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Organization of Islamic Co-operation (OIC), and now many Libyan politicians are thinking of involving OIC to help Libyans unite. So maybe through OIC and through the institutions that Turkey is strong in the Islamic world, some initiatives can take place in Libya. Turkey can also have a role through civil society organizations. For instance, during the revolution, IHH was very supportive in

helping Libyans and their salvation.

Another thing is that I noticed that there are not enough Turkish scholars or researchers that are doing research on Libya. I think it is about time. Our societies are very close, our histories are quite linked, plus for the future, we can have great partnerships.

**Thank you for your time and we wish you success in your works.**

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