

**Summary**  
**Online Discussion 15 March 2021**

**Security Vacuum in Europe's Southern Neighbourhood -  
Libya 10 years after the Arab Spring**

**Background:** Ten years after the Arab Spring, hopes for a democratic transformation process have been disappointed in many places. Disintegrating statehood, corruption, arms smuggling, competing great power interests and divided militias pose difficult challenges to Europe's neighbouring region in general and Libya in particular.

How can France, Italy and Germany speak with one voice on Europe's southern flank and contain the ambitions of other powers in the region? What incentives can be created in Libya to give the local people a perspective for development? How realistic are the prospects of elections towards the end of this year? Does the Bundeswehr mandate for the EU mission *IRINI* need to be changed or even expanded?

**Highlights:**

- **The election of a transitional government can be seen as a positive sign for a possible end of the decades-long conflict and the holding of parliamentary and presidential elections in December 2021.**
- **The acceptance of elections is very high among the people in Libya.**
- **The Berlin Libya Conference was an example of successful German diplomacy and, despite setbacks, created important conditions for the emergence of a political dialogue.**
- **The *IRINI* mission is making an important contribution to stabilising Libya.**
- **Further support for the political process is essential, also because the developments in Libya have an impact on the entire region.**
- **Only if the external actors can be moderated can sustainable success be achieved.**

**Welcome Remarks**

**David Schwake,**

Secretary General,  
*German Africa Foundation*

**Discussion**

**Commander Jan Fitschen,**

Commander of the frigate  
Hamburg on the *IRINI*  
mission from Aug. to Dec.  
2020

**Volkmar Klein MP,**

Spokesperson for  
Development Policy of the  
CDU/CSU Parliamentary  
Group & Board member,  
*German Africa Foundation*

**Daniel Stroux,**

Senior Technical Advisor to  
the UN Election Support  
Team as part of the UN  
Assistance Mission in Libya

**Thomas Volk,** Programme  
Director Political Dialogue in  
the Southern Mediterranean,  
*Konrad Adenauer Foundation*

**Moderation**

**Franziska Schwarzmann,**

free Journalistin

## The current situation in Libya

After years of conflict and Libya's political and social division between East and West, the parliament on 10 March approved the new cabinet of interim Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, who was elected by a Libyan body in February in a process facilitated by the United Nations. Now the new interim government faces the major challenge of holding the elections planned for the end of the year - the first since 2014. The signs for holding these elections and further steps towards democratisation are good, said Thomas Volk at the beginning of the discussion. Daniel Stroux echoed this confidence with regard to the holding of the first parliamentary session and successfully conducted local elections. Although these were limited due to local security risks, the citizens' approval of democratic elections is generally very high. The upcoming elections give hope that the country's social and political divisions can be overcome.

## German and European engagement

Referring to the recent political progress in Libya, Volkmar Klein MdB stressed the importance of German and European engagement, which had been instrumental in establishing a political dialogue and negotiating a ceasefire in October last year in the framework of the Berlin Libya Conference. Volk countered the criticism of France going it alone and the lack of political commitment in Germany by pointing to the successful multilateral approach and the good cooperation of Germany with France, Great Britain and Italy with regard to the IRINI mission. European cooperation is particularly important against the background of the loss of US support, Klein explained.

German support is also important with regard to the further political processes and the preparation of the elections, especially for the work of the United Nations and its role as a partner of the Libyan national election authority, added Stroux. In addition to preparing for the elections, Klein said that ensuring security in Libya should remain one of the top priorities, as this is the condition and foundation of sustainable development.

## The tasks and challenges of the IRINI mission

Since May 2020, EUNAVFOR MED IRINI has been monitoring and supporting compliance with the arms embargo against Libya. The decision of the German government to extend this mandate was taken two days after the discussion event, on 17 March. Approval by the German Bundestag is still pending.

Commander Jan Fitschen reported on the work of IRINI and the operations in the previous year. In particular, the search of a Turkish container ship against the will of NATO partner Turkey had caused a political scandal and attracted media attention. Fitschen explained that the operation was immediately cancelled after Turkey objected to a search. In retrospect, he emphasised that IRINI had succeeded in showing a presence on the ground; he also assessed the cooperation with the European partners as successful. However, Fitschen described an extension of the mission to land and air space, as some had demanded, as very complicated and much more difficult to implement than a mission at sea. The participants in the discussion agreed that IRINI had already achieved some successes and that the mandate should be

extended. Nevertheless, Fitschen also emphasised that IRINI was only an additional support in Libya's stabilisation process and that a political solution was necessary in the long term.

### A glimpse into the future

Volk explained that numerous international actors involved in the conflict still had geopolitical interests in Libya, such as Turkey and Russia. Only if these were moderated could success be achieved with a view to the upcoming elections, Fitschen concurred. Stroux considered the implementation of the elections to be realistic, even if it was still questionable on which constitutional basis they could take place, as there was currently no adopted constitution. Should a constitutional referendum be held, it could be difficult to hold elections this year. Moreover, the electoral system in the current draft constitution is very complicated. It weights the regions of the country differently, so that the western region, for example, cannot automatically provide a candidate for the presidential election. In his view, however, clarification of the design of the electoral system is crucial to avoid the outbreak of a possible new conflict. However, Stroux also stressed that as long as the national electoral commission remained independent, the elections could be successfully implemented. Democratic elections and the stabilisation of the country are not only of great importance for Libya, but for the entire region, Klein urged at the end of the discussion.