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The Role of Women in the Libyan Government: An Interview with Hajer Sharief

→ Andrew Findell-Aghnatis & Hajer Sharief.



BERLIN, GERMANY - JUNE 23: Libyan Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh (2nd L) and Libyan Foreign Minister Najla Mangoush (2nd R) are welcomed by German Foreign Minister, Heiko Mass (L) and Rosemary DiCarlo (R), Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs of the United Nations during the Second Berlin Conference on Libya, in Berlin, Germany on June 23, 2021. (Thomas Imo/photothek.de/Pool - Anadolu Agency)

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The Government of National Unity (GNU), formed on 10 March, is recognised as the legitimate government of Libya by both international and local actors. In a move hailed by many as a step forward for women’s political participation in the country, five of the parliament’s 32 ministers (15%) are women. Despite failing to reach the 30% threshold that had previously been announced by transitional Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, this nonetheless represented for many a meaningful step towards the inclusion of women in high-level political processes. This announcement is especially important when we realise that peace agreements including women are “35% more likely to last at least 15 years,” according to UN Women. Dbeibeh’s commitment to seeing women in positions of power is more commendable given Libya’s current lack of a National Action Plan (NAP) that follows UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325.¹

This said, women representation in the MENA region - where it does exist - is often ineffective in advancing feminist agendas and neglects to address structural patriarchy, thus failing to advance sustainable development and democratic reform. While many studies have been conducted as to the role of women in political life in such countries as Palestine, Iraq (both of which have 1325 NAPs), and Jordan, there has been less interest in countries in contexts of conflict, with humanitarian needs taking precedence in a hierarchy that continues to disenfranchise women and their role in local peacebuilding. In such a context, Dbeibeh’s appointment of five women to high-level ministerial positions is seen by some as a sign of hope that Libya is positioning itself as embracing more inclusive decision-making processes. Others, however, consider the appointment as a move to secure international legitimacy and political longevity and a mere sign of tokenism that reigns in the wider MENA region.

To shed light on these developments within the wider Libyan context, Andrew Findell-Aghnati, Programme and Communications Coordinator at the Arab Reform Initiative, spoke to Hajer Sharief, co-founder of Together We Build It, one of ARI’s partner associations in the SAWT project. The project takes a broader and more holistic view of what “peace processes” mean and look like and focuses on the emergence of a new generation of women activists in MENA. It also seeks to quantitatively and qualitatively increase women’s meaningful inclusion in political and peace processes in the MENA region.



Who is Hajer Sharief and what is Together We Build It?

I am a Libyan woman and I've spent the last 10 years pushing for peace in Libya. I co-founded the organisation Together We Build It (TWBI; ma'an nabniha) with Rida Al-Tubuly in the hopes of contributing to lasting peace in our country. At TWBI, we believe in fostering an inter-generational approach to formal and non-formal peacebuilding, especially through focusing on issues of Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) and youth empowerment. We are currently one of the partners in the ARI-led SAWT (Supporting Arab Women at the Table) project, a regional project to advance a feminist peace agenda. In addition to this, we have our She is Libya campaign, our Super Banaweeet graphic novels, and Women Build Peace on the Ground project.

The GNU has been lauded for having women in high-level positions. In your opinion, does this represent a real breakthrough and opportunity for conflict resolution?

Honestly, it depends on how one decides to look at it; it is a major step forward for women political participation and WPS agendas in general. At TWBI, and as you've mentioned, we are firm believers that you can't have lasting peace without including as diverse a range of people as possible, and experience has shown that peace built with women is more durable. What's more, there are now women serving as ministers for foreign affairs and for justice, which goes against the narrative that women should only work in the 'softer' fields such as culture or women's affairs. I say this not at all to belittle the nature of the work conducted in these ministries, which remains vital, but rather to emphasise that the narrative of 'women work in women's fields' is slowly changing.

If we take a step back and look at the GNU overall, then it becomes more



complicated. I can't talk about the GNU and ignore the fact that it remains a government that wasn't democratically elected - and this is the second time we're seeing this. This pattern is alarming to me; I am afraid that the public will begin to think that governments coming in by appointment is the norm: first armed groups fight, then the UN comes in and brings them together, and finally, these groups decide on the power-sharing arrangements.

When these large international bodies come in, there is often a hierarchy of priorities put into place that doesn't allow for the inclusion of youth, women, or other marginalised groups. So, of course, these power-sharing arrangements don't last. When we advocate for our vision of how the decision-making process should be – inclusive, transparent, respectful of the bare minimum of human rights, transparent, accountable –, either within Libya or internationally, we are constantly told that it is not a “realistic” ask due to ongoing war. This is a classic way to silence the voices of those who are unheard: to say that they should not focus on the quality of the solution, but rather be happy that there is any solution at all.

We must remember that the GNU is a *transitional* government. It can ensure neither progress nor continued advancement of the WPS agenda in Libya. Its role is more focused on smoothly facilitating the upcoming elections.

You mentioned that Najla Al-Mangouch has been appointed as the minister of Foreign Affairs. Do you think it is problematic that she was living in the US before her appointment? What role can the diaspora, and specifically women in the diaspora, play in this period of transition?

We have to acknowledge that a large part of the Libyan diaspora is comprised of



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people who were forced to leave, with big waves in 2011, 2014, and 2019. So when we talk about the role the diaspora can play or the importance of their participation, we're not just talking about Libyans who are living abroad; we're talking about people who were forced to leave, and others who are displaced. When talking about national reconciliation and peacebuilding, it is essential to keep this in mind, because we also have to talk about people who were forced to leave. Many Libyans are living in Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, and countless other countries; without them, it would be impossible to discuss national reconciliation.

We must remember that the diaspora also has a role in activism because activism is also about access. The issues that Libyans face in terms of mobility are well known, but it is also important for Libyan voices to be part of international platforms where decisions are being made on Libya, such as the UNSC, where Libya is discussed in detail. Members of the diaspora should understand that they have easier access to these platforms than Libyans inside Libya. And if you have access, then it's always beneficial to use it to ensure that Libyan voices both inside and outside of Libya, especially those that were forced to leave, be taken into account. As further marginalised voices, women are especially important and must be included in these discussions.

As for Najla Al-Mangouch, who was living in the US when she was appointed as Foreign Minister, I know that she is a prominent activist and is heavily involved in peacebuilding in Libya. I don't, therefore, think the fact that she was living abroad when she was appointed is something negative or alarming. It would have been alarming if the person appointed had nothing to do with Libya or Libyan politics. But I believe this standard should also apply to those living inside Libya – it is fundamental that anyone appointed during a period of political transition show determination to work for the betterment of Libya.

With Al-Mangouch, there was strong backlash on social media, and possibly political backlash behind closed doors. I wouldn't describe this as pressure to resign; there was no formal process, either administrative or political, that was triggered. I also believe that many of Al-Mangouch's critics are speaking from a toxic gendered perspective, which leads to wrong and dangerous conclusions. If she says something that someone doesn't like, it is immediately linked to the fact that she is a woman. Everyone is so focused on what Mangouch says, how she



walks, what she wears; there's always going to be backlash due to the spotlight she is under. The previous foreign minister could have made statements that appeared more biased than Al-Mangoush now, but would have enjoyed a greater degree of leniency. If Al-Mangoush were to say something people don't like, many would say that "diplomacy is not for women, that's why she's not diplomatic." Libya is a political minefield and you're never going to be able to please everyone. However, this doesn't really worry me much; while it is absolutely unacceptable, it is expected. My only worry is for her security situation, as there is a proven pattern of targeted and tailored violence against outspoken women leaders and activists.²

This being said, whenever TWBI works, we always remind ourselves that Libyan society is receptive to change. Libyans are receptive to having women in government. There are groups in Libyan society who protest specific governmental decisions, and yet no one went out and protested against the appointment of the female foreign minister. There were some negative voices on social media, but we should always distinguish between what people say and what they do. If Libyan society were so against her appointment, then people would have come out. There would have been at least one organised protest.

What about those who say that Al-Mangoush lacks the necessary qualifications?

The "lack of qualifications" excuse, both in and outside Libya, has been present for so long that it should be apparent that it is no more than a slogan. What do they mean by qualifications? In the sense of education? Evidence shows that this doesn't apply. Perhaps professional working experience? This doesn't apply either. Political experience, then? This applies to the majority of Libyans, including men, because of the absolute lack of political processes both under Qaddafi's regime and during the past 10 years – there was no process that someone could be a part of and through which you could claim to have political experience. Even now there is really no political system. Everyone is coming in with raw experience, and the best example for this is Dbeibeh himself, who has no track record of service or political participation of any form.



The first foreign leader to visit Libya under the new government was Kais Saied. Given the ‘uniqueness’ of the Tunisian case, how do you think this could affect intra-regional feminist movements?

I don't want to sound critical, and this has nothing to do with the Tunisian president, but I strongly believe that inter-regional solidarity in the region (and in other places) is not facilitated or inspired by governmental-political relationships. Tunisia is a country that has helped Libya a lot; it is one of the only countries in the region, if not the only, where no conditions were placed on Libyans who went to Tunisia. In fact, they provided enormous support to Libyans fleeing the conflict. There are strong relationships between different women's organisations in Libya and Tunisia and there is indeed a strong sense of solidarity, which is something I see myself. However, I'm not quite sure whether the political leadership of these two countries is thinking of playing an important role in facilitating these relations on a WPS level.

For women peacebuilding and women's rights organisations: where to go from here?

The main challenge activists and organisations face whenever we start planning, executing, and doing our advocacy work is a lack of transparency, which leads to a lack of information. This applies to Libyan processes as much as it applies to international processes on Libya. Let us imagine that we're going to advocate for a quota or women's participation in a political or peace process on either a national or international level. While this is excellent news, we don't know what the process will look like, when it will happen, how many people will be part of the process – we have no basic information. This is all too often the situation, which makes it



impossible to advocate for concrete actions. To give you an example. Let's look at the scheduled elections in December and the national/international statements of decision-makers. We only found out recently that both parliamentary and presidential elections would be held, the legal framework is far from complete, the list of representatives is slow to come out, the political parties are unclear in their messaging, and so on. Will there be a quota, or reserved seats, or mixed lists (zebra lists)? As you can see, there are so many questions that need answering before we can have a sense of what these elections will look like. And there's this lack of information because there is a lack of transparency. On one hand, this comes from the GNU, which hasn't been clear about the intended processes. But on the other, this also comes from internationally led processes, with large INGOs announcing the decision, then disappearing, and then launching the elections.

Do you think that a 1325 NAP would be a way forward?

I strongly believe that having something written on paper is better than nothing at all, as this provides a constant reference that can be consulted when necessary. As such, having a 1325 NAP would of course be important. We have been calling on Libya to adopt a 1325 NAP since 2013, and yet there is still almost nothing written regarding women peace and security in Libya.

One major issue with working for women peace and security in Libya is instability. Turnover of officials can happen at any time, so you could be advocating for years and suddenly must start all over again once an official or cabinet is changed. It is, therefore, important to have official policies and guidelines that can ensure the work for WPS does not go to waste and that we do not have to always start again from scratch.

As for Dbiebeh's views on this, I wish he would come out more and share his opinions with us as our appointed Prime Minister. We honestly don't know if he has concrete plans for gender equality and women political participation in Libya. There's not much information out there and he hasn't made any extensive statements on the matter. This is the difference with a Prime Minister appointed by groups whose political, social, and ideological beliefs you don't know; it's very



difficult as an ordinary Libyan to understand who's governing you and the country.



Endnotes

1. The Security Council adopted [resolution \(S/RES/1325\)](#) on women and peace and security on 31 October 2000. The resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. Resolution 1325 urges all actors to increase the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all United Nations peace and security efforts. It also calls on all parties to conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, in situations of armed conflict. The resolution provides a number of important operational mandates, with implications for Member States and the entities of the United Nations system.
2. Read about: [Hanan al-Barassi](#), [Siham Sergewa](#), [Salwa Bughaigis](#), and [Magdulein Abaida](#)



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About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

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