Episode Transcript

Episode Title:
UN Mediation in Libya

Guest:
Stephanie Williams

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Jon Alterman:
Stephanie Williams served as the acting special representative of the UN Secretary-General and the head of the UN Support Mission in Libya from March 2020 until February 2021. Stephanie, welcome to Babel.

Stephanie Williams:
Thanks, Jon. It's really wonderful to join you here today. Great to be with you.

Jon Alterman:
The Libyan Civil War has been going on for almost a decade now. Why has it lasted for so long?

Stephanie Williams:
Well, after the Gaddafi regime was overthrown, Libya really atomized. We talk about divisions, but it was much more than divisions. Society fragmented at almost a molecular and atomic level, and I believe that there is now a chance for them to seriously come forward and at least move towards elections, which will hopefully usher in a period of institutional stability, unification. And really, the other dynamic over the last 10 years has been this erosion of sovereignty. So a big goal is a simple restoration of some measure of sovereignty in the country.

Jon Alterman:
Now, by my count, you were the sixth UN official leading negotiations in Libya, trying to bring Libyans back together. I know a bunch of the predecessors too, and you were more successful than most. What lessons did you learn from the previous five?

Stephanie Williams:
Look, I was brought in initially as the deputy under Ghassan Salamé, who was a great source of inspiration and a personal mentor to me. What I essentially worked on and implemented in the year between the time that he left, March 2020, and then his permanent replacement came in on February 8th of this year, was implementing the plan that we worked on together following Haftar's assault on Tripoli, where we essentially had to rewrite the entire mediation strategy given the international dynamics, given the fact that the Security Council had effectively ceased to exist.

Jon Alterman:
There's a story in The Guardian about your efforts. It said that in January you have deliberately been taking risks to force the pace on political, economic, and military reform. What risks did you try to force as you were getting closer to having an agreement?

Stephanie Williams:
A lot of this was driven by the Libyans themselves. There was calm on the ground after last June, and we were able to start two talks on the political process and then bring the military leaders together. But the economic situation in Libya and the humanitarian situation was deteriorating. While the conflict had stopped, the country had been plunged into the pandemic. Delivery of services, which were horrible in Libya in normal times really were even worse during this period. The electricity grid was close, and is still close, to collapse.
This was due to systematic misgovernance and corruption. And Libyans took to the streets. That was a signal that the patience of the public was wearing thin. We had that. We had the military leaders coming together in October, and they made it very clear to me that they wanted to see a united executive and they wanted to see national elections. The united executive and bringing the security institutions would help also solidify the ceasefire.

And there was this fear that the country was slipping out of their control because of the persistent and increasing foreign intervention. They felt that this was a moment, and then we used that. And again, it was their words. It's the words of the Libyan military leaders that we use, frankly, to put pressure on the political class, who are always the most difficult in any of these mediations, because they are the most reluctant to leave their seats.

Jon Alterman:

There was a military track, and a political track, and an economic track. And in many ways it was the military track, the so-called 5+5 group, that forged the way toward the compromise that was reached a little while ago. Were you surprised that the military track turned out to be the one that really got traction, or was that always the expectation when you set this up?

Stephanie Williams:

No, in fact, the track that started with the most ease was the economic track. The approach that Ghassan and I took was that you cannot start to tackle the political and military elements of the conflict until you really start to address the underlying economic drivers, it is a struggle over for authority and control of resources with a political class and a political culture that views access to the trough, access to the budget, as private Ghanimah, or the spoils.

Unless you start to unpackage the economic drivers of the conflict, it becomes very hard to progress. We started with the economic track, and then we picked up the military. The first Joint Military Commission meetings took place in Geneva. Really almost essentially right after Geneva, the delegations refused to meet face-to-face in Geneva. They asked for parallel talks, which is what we did for two physical rounds: one in January, one in February. During this time, Tripoli was still being assaulted. And so, you would sit at the table, and Tripoli Harbor was bombed one day, and it's hard to have talks when bombs are falling. So that was a very fraught period. Then Ghassan left, and that coincided with the onset of the pandemic. And so, we had to stop all physical meetings. We moved online. We recognized that we needed to reconstitute, rebuild the political track. We also moved the entire international process, the Berlin process, online with the internationals.

Because for every Libyan, intra-Libyan, Libyan-owned track, there's a complimentary international working group that plugs into that track. What's built in here is a continuing international engagement which is very important directly with the Libyan tracks.

That by the way, really helped on the economic track. Then because of the international and foreign interference in the country, Haftar had his sponsors and their intensive engagement on his behalf drove the UN-recognized government to seek the assistance of the Turks.

The Turks came in big time over the spring. The Government of National Accord, with the assistance of Turkey, was able to push Haftar out of western Libya to the stalemate, the current line of demarcation between Sirte and Jufra in central Libya. The fighting stopped. There's a calm on the ground that, Alhamdulillah, exists till today. That enabled us to see if there was still some fluidity, particularly in the military and the political tracks.
And the military, the two sides of the Joint Military Commission, the so-called 5+5, asked the mission for a meeting in September. Here also, the Egyptians were helpful because they organized a pre-meeting, a warm-up session to the Joint Military Commission. They did a meeting at the end of September, and then we convened the 5+5 in Geneva in October. These guys came to Geneva wanting to meet face to face and ready for a deal. I think this distinguishes this from other mediations. Documents drafted by the Libyans, discussed by the Libyans, adopted by the Libyans, a UN-facilitated process.

Jon Alterman:
What was the balance between how much you were talking to the Libyans and Libyan representatives versus working on the outside sponsors in the diplomacy of all the patrons of various proxy forces in this battle?

Stephanie Williams:
That's such a good question. I would say up until April 4, 2019, we lived and worked primarily in Libya. I did a lot of travel all over the country. We really devoted ourselves to the Government of National Accord, particularly after the ceasefire in the fall of 2018, the implementation of the economic reforms, addressing security sector reform, trying to start on DDR.

We had a lot of attention there, but then also on building the National Conference for April 14, 2019 that was aborted by Haftar's attack on the capitol. At that point, because of the rupture in the international community of what had been a fragile, I would say, consensus on the Libyan files and the Security Council, we then had to really start devoting our time more to the international umbrella. Ghassan went to Berlin to pitch this to the chancellor, who of course agreed to have Germany sponsor this process. Then we started a series of meetings at the senior official level to build towards the conference that took place on January 19, 2020.

There was a shift. Because before tackling the Libyan tracks, we needed at least to be able to bring in the major players, the P5—the permanent members of the Security Council—plus regional countries directly interfering in the conflict—namely UAE, Egypt, and Turkey—and Germany as the sponsor. Italy, of course, is a country that has a long-standing relationship with Libya, and then the regional organizations. We really worked on that. We produced the conference on January 19, 2020 with the whole set of commitments, which of course some of the players immediately violated or ignored. Then we had the Security Council resolution, and then the pivot to the Libyan tracks.

Jon Alterman:
I want to ask you about the mediation piece. You spent decades as U.S. diplomat in the Middle East. I think I first met you probably a couple of decades ago when you were in Abu Dhabi. You were the deputy chief of mission in Iraq. You were the deputy chief of mission in Jordan, where I also saw you. You were the deputy chief of mission and chargé d'affaires in Bahrain during the Arab Spring. You have had tremendous experience as a U.S. diplomat, and now you were put into a position as a UN mediator. How is that job different from what you'd been doing for decades? What things are more or less continuations?

Stephanie Williams:
Look, in the UN, we were doing on the spot mediations that I would never have been able to do as the U.S. diplomat, because I probably just wouldn't have been in the room with some of these characters. As an example, in late August, early September 2018, there was an attack on Tripoli by some Misratan
groups, and then Tarhouna, the infamous Kaniyat, a murderous militia, attacked Tripoli. And of course, the Tripoli armed groups defended the city.

We literally organized ceasefire meetings in one of the neighboring cities, the large city of Zawiya. We had all these guys—I mean, the gunslingers are at the table and we’re talking to all of them. We brokered a ceasefire agreement, which all except one of the parties to the conflict signs, we achieved the ceasefire. And then, what I took from my U.S. government career, and I really learned this in Jordan and Iraq, was how to operationalize these things. How to use, in this case, the ceasefire agreement, to leverage economic reforms.

We're recognizing, again, that the economic drivers of the conflict needed to be addressed. We wrote into the ceasefire agreement in Zawiya that the Government of National Accord and the Central Bank needed to implement economic reforms, and that's what started the process for the exchange rate reform. I took from my experience in Jordan and Iraq how to think outside the box in terms of operationalizing agreements, really to ease the humanitarian conditions for the population, and I applied that in the UN.

**Jon Alterman:**

There are domestic conflicts throughout the Middle East. We have a 10-year civil war in Syria. We have a not quite 10-year civil war going on in Yemen. Arguably, there's an ongoing civil war in Iraq, where you served as DCM. What did you learn from this Libya experience, from your experiences as a UN mediator, that you think should inform the U.S. approach to the other conflicts, understanding every conflict is different? What insights did you gain from bringing this group of Libyans to a different place that you think could be applied to other conflicts in the region?

**Stephanie Williams:**

I think a local ownership of the process is key. I had observed, particularly in Iraq, that the leaders are somehow identified by external parties. I think that's inherently fraught. There has to be some national, local ownership of the process for it to have any hopes of moving the country forward. In Libya, one of the things that I decided that we needed to do was recognizing that the political dialogue was essentially 75 people who were not elected by anybody to make some serious decisions about the country.

So how do you bake in some legitimacy to this process for those six million other Libyans who all think that they should be at the table? You start by this code of conduct, the pledge of recusal so that it's a forum that is not seen to be a forum for self-dealing. And then you shine the light on it, which is what we started to do in Tunis, and we did it more so in Geneva. This is also mediating in the time of the pandemic, where you can't have physical meetings. Again, ironically, I think just this forced us actually to be more inclusive in that we ran sub-tracks for the political process.

There was a women's sub-track, a youth sub-track, and a municipality sub-track. We had meetings with all of these sub-tracks. They had repertoires who reported into the group of 75 with their recommendations on the way forward. But then we also had these large digital dialogues—five digital dialogues between the end of October, early November through January 31—with each digital dialogue having over 1000 Libyans online, most of them young Libyans, by the way. They have most facility with digital communications, digital technology.

And we had all of this into the dialogue to put pressure, and particularly to put pressure on the political forces. Because in the dialogue, you had civil society. You had tribal constituencies. You had the social components. It wasn't strictly the guys in the suits or whatever. It was a mix of personalities, but you still needed to inject some popular pressure on the dialogue itself. We did that through the digital dialogues where we also ran polls, thought polls, through these digital dialogues.
So that's where we could say, “Okay, we've just done a poll of a 1,000 Libyans. Guess what? 77 percent of them want national elections on time December 24. Political class, you need to produce the framework for those elections.” A percentage, not much lower, I would say like 69 percent, as I recall, in one of the spot polls wants unified, executive, sovereign institutions prior to elections, in order, basically, to improve services at the local level in Libya. That's what we focused on, and that's what I think distinguished this particular mediation at this time and during the pandemic.

Jon Alterman:
And just speaking about Iraq, which is not in a civil war, but certainly has a number of internal tensions, do you think this transparency approach holds promise?

Stephanie Williams:
I think it does. Look, deals cooked up in smoke-filled or shisha-filled rooms, to me, lack legitimacy. Again, for me, the goal in Libya has to be national elections, because of the inherent depravity frankly of the political class and the fact that this political class has had ten years. It is time for a new generation of Libyans. I hope that this will include many women to put themselves forward for national office. The only way to do that is to shine the light on the political class and to make sure that you are lifting the voices of the overwhelming majority of Libyans who want these elections on time, who know that these elections can be produced if the political class is put under pressure. They have to be put under pressure by the international community as well. These guys just can't be allowed to continue to prevaricate and delay.

Jon Alterman:
There are any number of voices in the Middle East that say that the problem when you get rid of authoritarian government is the people left to their own devices will slide toward extremism. They will open the door toward an authoritarian or totalitarian movements. You're feeling, having worked in Iraq, having been on the ground, working mediation in Libya is: the answer to chaos is not authoritarianism. The answer to chaos is greater democracy.

Stephanie Williams:
Absolutely. This I know from Libya. Because, look, even during the height of the conflict, the attack on Tripoli, municipal council elections continued to be held particularly in western and southern Libya. And okay, participation rates could be better, and it's definitely challenging to conduct elections during a period of conflict and a pandemic, so a double whammy, but people still turned out. They turned out to run as candidates and they turned out to vote. And to me, that's just another indication that the green shoots of democracy are definitely there in Libya, and again, all of the national polling supports the view that Libyans want national elections.

They want to be able to renew the democratic legitimacy of their institutions. And frankly, this is good for the international community as well, because it's only the democratically elected sovereign government is going to be able to forge the strategic relationships, including with all the countries, by the way, that are interfering in Libya that will help again to build stability and make Libya much less of a threat to its immediate neighbors and to regional peace and security.

Jon Alterman:
Stephanie Williams, thank you for joining us.
Stephanie Williams:
Thank you, Jon. It's been great.