

A portrait of Ghassan Salamé, an older man with white hair, wearing a dark suit jacket over a light blue shirt. He is looking slightly to the right. The background is a blurred architectural setting with a window and a balcony railing.

OSLO
FORUM
Interview

Exiting chaos

Ghassan Salamé
reflects on
peacemaking

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Dialogue

Mediation for peace

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The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) is a private diplomacy organisation founded on the principles of humanity, impartiality and independence. Its mission is to help prevent, mitigate, and resolve armed conflict through dialogue and mediation.

Co-hosted by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and HD, the Oslo Forum is a discreet and informal annual retreat which convenes conflict mediators, peacemakers, high-level decision-makers and key peace process actors.

The following interview was conducted in February 2018 as part of the briefing material for Oslo Forum participants. This interview does not represent the positions of the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

Photo credit

Ghassan Salamé standing outside the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue's headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, 12 February 2018

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You are the fifth SRSG for Libya in less than seven years. How do you build on the work of your predecessors?

Ghassan Salamé: It is evident that the country needs something else. The Skhirat Agreement has not been properly implemented nor been entirely accepted by parliament.¹ You also have a few parties in Libya who say that the agreement was dead when it was signed. But the Security Council has decided to extend the life of the Skhirat Agreement because there is no other framework for the Libyans to operate in right now. I have to accept this, whatever my views on that agreement or on the institutions it put in place, and work with all parties to reinterpret and build acceptance of the agreement despite all limitations.

But I think there is a general deficit of legitimacy in the country. Everybody is, at the same time, half legal and half illegal, and *none* are truly legitimate. You *need* legitimacy, and legitimacy cannot be produced by yet another decision of the UNSC or the SRSG, it needs to come from the Libyans themselves. In this regard, I take a Libyan-led and Libyan-owned process literally, as you have seen in our approach to the National Conference. If there is something that has distinguished my first months in this role, it is that I have reached out to *everybody*. I went wherever security allowed me to go. The most pleasant

sentence I heard was in Ghariyan: “Thank you for coming, you are the first person from the UN we ever meet.” This is true. No UN official had ever been to Ghariyan, even though it is only 80km south of Tripoli.

After Skhirat, everybody wanted the UN to support the Government of National Accord (GNA). So, consciously or unconsciously, the mission had little contact with those who either refused the Skhirat Agreement or were not part of it, or were not part of the GNA, or were militantly opposed to it. So, when I say I met with everybody, it also means that I have never refused to meet with people openly against the Skhirat Agreement: those who are

openly excluded from the political process, or otherwise self-excluded from the political process. That goes for the monarchists, the Ghadaffists or others. I even accused those who supported the Skhirat Agreement of not doing enough to reach out, and I keep saying that, for political agreements not to be on the defensive (and this applies everywhere, not only in Libya), they need to remain alive and reach out and incorporate more and more people. What I felt in Libya was exactly the opposite: that those who supported the political agreement took advantage of it and did not want others to join. So they were very sceptical when I said: “This agree-

ment will fall because no new blood is added to it.” It needs to be sold to others. It needs to be reinvigorated by the accession of other groups into the agreement.

At the same time, Libya is fragmenting. What are the implications of this fragmentation on your mediation efforts? And how are you addressing this issue?

Ghassan Salamé: A medical doctor is told when he gets his degree that if he cannot cure a malady he should not aggravate it. So, for me, it means not to be part of a fragmentation process. For that you need to tell all Libyans

that disagreements may exist between them, but that you are ready to talk to everybody. For example, in dealing with some groups who were supporting the former regime I said very clearly: “If you are struggling for your inclusion, I support you, but you should neither exclude yourselves and complain about it, nor aim for the restoration of the old regime. Ending your exclusion is absolutely legitimate, restoring the old regime is not. You should also not use any armed or military means to end your exclusion.” So there is a dialogue, and I was happy that it led to real breakthroughs. And I am sure that thousands, probably tens of thousands, went to register on the electoral lists, which indicates that they want to be part of the political process.

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¹ Brokered by the United Nations (UN) in December 2015, the Skhirat Agreement established the Government of National Accord (GNA).

As the representative of the international community, part of your role is to offer a vision of the future to Libyans that they may not have thought of themselves. Have you seen that role for yourself, given the fragmentation of the country?

Ghassan Salamé: Well, this is a country with the dimensions of a continent. It is three times the size of France, twice the size of Egypt, with 6.5 million inhabitants. Cities are scattered, local identities are strong. I have discovered that many Libyans do not know about local animosities far from their homes, elsewhere in the country. These animosities can deteriorate in no time into an open conflict, but they remain local conflicts. So, the view from outside that the country is divided into two or three parts is, in my opinion, an illusion. Rather, the country is made of a chain of local conflicts, and most of the conflicts are with your neighbours, not distant forces: with a neighbouring city, or clan or tribe, or sometimes two neighbourhoods of the same city. Most conflicts are local, and therefore fragmentation is related to geography, and is something you can do very little about. Therefore, you should accept this fragmentation, you should empower local power. You should empower municipalities because they are dealing with public services at the local level. People believe that giving more power to the mayors will increase or institutionalise fragmentation. This is not true. Accepting some form of local power is not fragmentation.

Strong local governance for a strong state, as you have said previously?

Ghassan Salamé: Strong local government is needed for a strong state. In fact, a strong local power or government is the best remedy against the partition of the country. By recognising local power, you can help to avoid groups of cities or

tribes feeling excluded, because their needs are provided for by their own local power.

The problem we have now is that, legally, local power is very, very weak. In practice, the central government is even weaker and cannot, or does not want to, reach out locally. But if local powers are not legally empowered, they feel they are outside the law when offering public services. For example, they cannot collect a single local tax, which is quite strange. Local powers depend on the central government because all the taxes go there and the central government does not want to allocate more resources to local authorities because, in a *rentier* society, money is power.² It is all a problem of how money is allocated.

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The main conflict-producing factor in Libya now is predation: the competition for resources among groups, clans, politicians, individuals, armed groups – all kinds of people – who are ready for all kinds of ideological and political alliances and collusions, even previously unthinkable alliances and collusions, in order to prevent a different group from taking most of the resources. It is high-level political opportunism, and a very creative way of trying to snatch larger pieces of the cake. And the cake is growing, because Libya is now producing more than two-thirds of what it used to produce in happier days, and oil prices are going up again. So, the revenues are becoming substantial, and – in contrast to the situation in Iraq in 2003, when assets and revenues were frozen or channelled through the Oil-for-Food programme – in Libya, revenues are open to very primordial competition.

² A 'rentier state' derives national revenues predominantly from export of natural resources rather than domestic taxation.

And how is your action plan dealing with vested interests?

Ghassan Salamé: In three ways, but I am far from having accomplished what I have in mind. First, my plan is to help build institutions with enough legitimacy to make the players accountable. With two competing parliaments and three competing governments, it is very hard to introduce the idea of accountability. But you need accountability, and accountability cannot be pursued by anyone but legitimate institutions. So, by having a process in the action plan that includes, among other things, a constitution and elections, we hope to produce enough legitimacy to enforce much-needed accountability.

Second, we are investigating how external help could be made available to those in the system who want to spend the money where it should be spent – to those who have something left of the concept of public good in their minds. For that, I have encouraged the Bretton Woods Institutions to be more involved. We need such expertise on ways to help local institutions to defend themselves and to defend their values – for example, by naming and shaming, or possibly by freezing the foreign accounts of some big bandits. But for that you need a lot of expertise, which I don't have. That is why I am inviting Bretton-Woods institutions to be more involved. I had a number of meetings with the World Bank, but I am also in touch with the International Monetary Fund.

The third way to deal with vested interests is to try to bring the Libyan national interest to the forefront. This is, in my view, the most important solution, and the solution closest to my heart. The dominant concept today is how to divide the cake. The idea behind the National Conference Process, which we launched together with HD in April, is common ownership of the cake: the idea of public good and the need for some kind of a common identity that defends the national interest against intruders, against foreign interference, against unregulated migration and against all breaches of national sovereignty. The National Conference Process wants to highlight this idea so that Libyans can feel much more the common ground they share, rather than solely being moved by the defence or enlargement of their share of the cake.

Over the many years you have worked in this field, do you see some trends emerging? Are peace processes different from those of the 1990s or 2000s?

Ghassan Salamé: The first worrying trend is that there is less flexibility in the international system than back in the 1990s. Perhaps we were naive and optimistic but, nowadays, the international system consists of big powers who feel they have much less in common than 20 years ago. As a result, foreign interference is again becoming more vicious. That is one big, worrying trend.

The second big trend is that the conflicts are more different than we believe, and therefore the remedies need to be even more idiosyncratic. For example, I believe that a civil conflict in a *productive* society is very different from a civil conflict in a *rentier* society: in terms of the stakes, the foreign versus the domestic financing of the war, the greed of local and foreign players, and the kind of objectives the main parties have for themselves. I think conflicts are becoming more complex and diverse; therefore, you need to be more creative in your remedies.

A third trend, a big difference from 20 years ago, is social media. Social media is very important, especially in former closed societies such as Libya. Suddenly, you have a flood of news: real news, fake news, rumours, insults, hatred, you name it. The big difference here, is that when you have a civil conflict in an open society – like Lebanon in 1975 – people can still kill each other, but they have a discriminatory habit: they have been trained to distinguish between a rumour and the news, between news and opinions, between information and disinformation. In Lebanon, people would spread fake news and in a matter of two hours it would become the joke of the town. In Libya, a closed society, a rumour can spread like wildfire because the technology is available – TV, Facebook, Twitter – and people are not trained enough to appraise the quality of what they are told. This fuels civil wars like nothing else. Sometimes a rumour that has proven entirely false is extremely difficult to erase from people's minds.

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Especially when combined with fear and insecurity . . .

Ghassan Salamé: . . . and suspicion! The peace process needs a certain level of trust, so if suspicion is fuelled every day by fake news, rumours, insinuations – it is very, very hard to rebuild trust. And this has been a huge challenge for me in Libya, which you would not have had, say, in a conflict 20 years ago.

Based on the three trends you have identified, how do you see the future of UN peacemaking?

Ghassan Salamé: It is probably too early to answer this question, but I would at least point to two things. First, I think that some thought should be given to the freedom given to the head of the mission, because I think the bureaucracy weighs too much on him or her, that he or she wastes too much time dealing with the heavy machinery that is supposed to be a support but often draws time and energy. I wish I had more time to deal with Libya and could spend less time dealing with the UN system.

Second, I think that peacemaking is an area in which the famous cliché of a public–private partnership can be very fruitful. I think this is exactly the area where the UN should go a bit further instead of competing with various NGOs and complaining about think-tanks. Bring them in, build partnerships. There are things that only the UN can do, and there are things that only non-UN people can do. Having been on both sides of the divide, I am really surprised that neither side understands that there is a unique role for each of them. Working with a large NGO in partnership allows more flexibility. For example, we have partnered with you, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), in order to facilitate the National Conference consultations throughout the country. That has been very fruitful and I hope that the UN develops more partnerships like this.

It is interesting that you did not mention the prevalence and proliferation of Jihadist groups as an emerging trend. How have they impacted your work?

Ghassan Salamé: This is a very important issue. I don't believe such groups are part of the story.

They are part of a completely different story. An oil man looks at Libya as a place where there is the largest reserve of oil in all of Africa; the Jihadist looks at Libya as a possible shelter because there is no state authority. He is not part of the main story but has the same opportunistic approach.

Libya is a conservative society when it comes to a number of social issues, but it is neither a country where Jihadists make a difference, nor one in which the population is largely attracted to Jihadist views. It is a place, however, without a functioning state, and so it is a place where you can stay for a while until you can fight again elsewhere. A place where you can train, buy weapons, flee if the French deploy in Mali, or if President Déby is successful in Chad, or if there is too much pressure in Egypt, or Syria, or Iraq. So, I don't think that Jihadists are part of the conflict in that sense, but areas of civil conflict are of interest to them. They have adopted a very pragmatic and utilitarian approach.

But there was an attempt in Sirte by ISIL to control and administrate a territory and not only to use it as a rear base or safe haven.

Ghassan Salamé: Yes, but it was defeated largely with local power. In Benghazi, there was some foreign help; in Sirte also, especially air power. But it was basically defeated locally with a lot of chauvinistic Libyan approaches to foreign Jihadists in their midst: "Why are they here? They should not be here!"

Jihad is a very big issue in today's world. Jihadists are active in places where there are no civil conflicts, like Paris or London, and adjust their strategy of terror depending on the country. But this does not mean that they are a very central feature of any civil conflict. Look at the Rohingya for example: the Myanmar army has been trying to portray them as Jihadists. But having spent a year on and off in Myanmar, I can tell you that if there was any kind of Jihadism there, it was extremely marginal to the real story. I spent days and weeks in Cox's Bazaar and I can recognise a Jihadist when I see one. So, we would do a big disservice to peace and human rights in that part of the world if we introduced Jihad as a central feature of that conflict.

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Would you challenge the assertion that a substantial part of the Libyan conflict is caused by regional interference?

Ghassan Salamé: My answer depends, in fact, on the year. One can make the case that, without foreign interference in 2011, the regime would still be there. So, here, foreign interference made all the difference. Same with Syria to a large extent, and other conflicts as well.

But do I answer with the same certainty today? No, my answer would be much more nuanced. Foreign interference is not only foreign planes hitting domestic targets but also more interesting, hybrid, forms of interference. There is, for example, no group, army or militia in Libya that does not rely on mercenaries. In fact, in some groups, mercenaries are more numerous than local Libyan hands. Is this foreign interference? Sub-contracting? What do you call it? What is the relationship between a certain group and the home-country of their members? You have very different answers depending on the groups fighting. We know that there are Chadian, Nigerian and Sudanese people fighting in Libya, and in some cases they are the majority of their groups, and they do their fighting sometimes for very little money. You see sub-Saharan mercenaries switching to a completely different group for better pay. So, there is a Libyan market for the armed man – typical of a rentier economy.

This year's Oslo Forum looks at how comprehensive peace agreements are becoming rare. Do you see this as a trend?

Ghassan Salamé: As Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai told Richard Nixon in 1972 when asked about the French revolution: it is “too early to say.”

In the case of Libya, let me be very frank. I believe that some of the most basic issues need at least a generation to fix. The challenge for SRSGs like me is not so much to fix everything in the one, two, or three years we spend here. The real challenge is to ask yourself: “Are we helping to put the country on the best track for its future, or not?” We will not see the results before many, many years have passed. If we want to change the culture of predation into a culture of common good, or if we want to change a *rentier* economy into a productive one, we certainly need many decades – at least a generation. It is not possible to say: “I am going to put an end to looting and the rentier economy while I am here” – this you will not be able to do. But can we curtail predation a bit and build a constituency for more accountability against the looting of the country by its own sons? This is the big question.

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Finally, how much time will Member States give you? I can already see some signs of impatience because people have elections in their countries. They need success stories – even fake ones.

So, how much integrity do you have? If you go into spinning quick wins in order to please this or that country, you end up running after a mirage.

This interview was conducted in February 2018 by Katia Papagianni, HD's Director for Mediation Support and Policy, and Romain Grandjean, HD's Director for Near East and North Africa.

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