

# LIBYA

## A TALE OF TWO PRIME MINISTERS

BİLGEHAN ÖZTÜRK

SETA | ANALYSIS

APRIL 2022 NO.78







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SETA Yayınları

ISBN: 978-625-7712-88-0

Layout: Said Demirtaş

Printed in Turkey, İstanbul

by Turkuvaz Haberleşme ve Yayıncılık A.Ş., 2022

**SETA | SİYASET, EKONOMİ VE TOPLUM ARAŞTIRMALARI VAKFI**

Nenehatun Cd. No: 66 GOP Çankaya 06700 Ankara TÜRKİYE

Tel: +90 312 551 21 00 | Faks: +90 312 551 21 90

www.setav.org | info@setav.org | @setavakfi

**SETA | İstanbul**

Defterdar Mh. Savaklar Cd. Ayvansaray Kavşağı No: 41-43

Eyüpsultan İstanbul TÜRKİYE

Tel: +90 212 395 11 00 | Faks: +90 212 395 11 11

**SETA | Washington D.C.**

1025 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 1106

Washington D.C., 20036 USA

Tel: 202-223-9885 | Faks: 202-223-6099

www.setadc.org | info@setadc.org | @setadc

**SETA | Berlin**

Kronenstraße 1, 10117 Berlin GERMANY

berlin@setav.org

**SETA | Brussels**

Avenue des Arts 27, 1000 Brussels BELGIUM

Tel: +3226520486

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## AUTHOR

### **Bilgehan Öztürk**

Bilgehan Öztürk got his bachelor's degree from TOBB University of Economics and Technology in Ankara. He was awarded Jean Monnet Scholarship in 2011 and completed his master's degree at King's College London, in the Department of Middle East and Mediterranean Studies with "Distinction". He was awarded "Associate of King's College (AKC)" title, which is granted by King's College London only, for his special degree on religion and philosophy. He is a PhD candidate at the Middle East Institute of Sakarya University. Turkish foreign and security policies towards the MENA region, non-state armed actors, civil war, countering violent extremism, and Turkish-Russian relations are among his research interests. He is the co-author of the report "Countering Violent Extremism in Libya."

## SUMMARY

While Dbeibah is motivated to go to elections this year to get out of this impasse, international community's preoccupation with the war in Ukraine renders Libya elections less of a priority for international diplomacy.

Libya seems to have entered a renewed period of tension and instability with the designation of Fathi Bashagha as the new 'prime minister' by the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) in a bold challenge against the authority and legitimacy of the incumbent Government of National Unity (GNU) and its Prime Minister Abdel Hamid Dbeibah. Dbeibah rebuffed the move and vowed to hand over the office only to an elected government, while Bashagha's failed attempts to enter Tripoli with the help of certain armed groups resulted in barely avoided clashes. Pro-Haftar groups already imposed shutdowns in certain oil terminals with the specific demand of Dbeibah's handover to Bashagha, which is exacerbating the ongoing instability. While Dbeibah is motivated to go to elections this year to get out of this impasse, international community's preoccupation with the war in Ukraine renders Libya elections less of a priority for international diplomacy.

## INTRODUCTION

Libya seems to have entered a renewed period of tension and instability after a relative calm of one year with the designation of former Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha as the prime minister of “the Government of National Stability (GNS)” by the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) on February 10, 2022 – a direct challenge to the mandate and legitimacy of incumbent Prime Minister Abdel Hamid Dbeibah and the Government of National Unity (GNU). Dbeibah rebuffed this move and vowed to hand over the office to only an elected government. Armed groups from both sides of the aisle occasionally come to the brink of clashes and the eastern members of the 5+5 Joint Military Commission (JMC), who represent Khalifa Haftar, recently withdrew from the activities of the JMC by calling for oil blockades to force Dbeibah and the GNU to hand over the office to Bashagha. A number of main oil facilities have now duly been shut down by armed groups loyal to Haftar,

stripping the country of much-needed oil revenues at a time of global energy crisis and running the risk of a renewal of conflict.

The coalition formation between Aguila Saleh and Bashagha and the designation of the latter as the PM, which instigated the subsequent series of events, came into being as a result of factors at individual, regional and international levels.

## INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Individuals matter in this conundrum. Saleh and Bashagha are the ones who kicked off this new round of confrontation. They basically joined forces against a common foe, Prime Minister Dbeibah. The merger of Saleh and Bashagha was fed by both urgency/push and prospects/pull factors. The urgency felt by the Saleh-Bashagha camp was pushed by the fact that Dbeibah has become the most popular political figure of any of his predecessors by far since he took office due to several reasons.<sup>1</sup> Dbeibah was arguably poised to increase his popularity via further social grants and government spending if he was allowed to stay in office. This, in turn, would mean allowing Dbeibah to turn his other opponents into obscure political figures without any palpable career prospects as politicians in the foreseeable future. This coalition between Saleh and Bashagha in the form of the latter’s designation as PM by a questionable vote in the HoR is a mere response to stave off this eventuality.

As a matter of fact, this is in no way the first attempt of either of the duo to unseat Dbeibah. Both Saleh and Bashagha have enough personal reasons to want to undermine, and if possible, to get rid of Dbeibah, as the latter was the one who denied the former office by defeating them in the

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<sup>1</sup> “National Opinion Poll of Registered Voters in Libya”, *Diwan*, 1-5 December 2021, Dec2021Survey.pdf - Google Drive; Author interviews throughout 2021.

LPDF vote in February 2021.<sup>2</sup> Both Saleh and Bashagha have tried to undermine and eliminate Dbeibah for the past year in their own respective capacities. In fact, Bashagha's desire to become the PM is not only about replacing Dbeibah. His ambition to become the PM is known to have preceded him given his conduct during his tenure in the GNA and his occasional collision with the then-PM Fayeze al-Sarraj.

Saleh, on the other hand, did his best to contract Dbeibah's area of manoeuvre for the past year, within his capacity as the speaker of the HoR. First, he, as the speaker of the HoR, did not allow the endorsement of the budget proposed by Dbeibah and the GNU.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Dbeibah and the GNU functioned without an approved budget for the past year, which resulted in the use of the Central Bank's (CBL) resources for government spending and services. Since Saleh has a near-total monopoly over holding sessions and determining the agenda of sessions in the HoR, this was directly a result of Saleh's personal discretion. Saleh's stated justification for not approving the budget was the "excessive" or "lavish" quality of the proposed budget's development section.<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding the "stated justification" of Saleh, his main concern was the fact that Dbeibah would increase his existing popularity even further thanks to a considerable budget for development. Saleh simply did not want to allow Dbeibah and the GNU to function properly with the long-term goal of undermining them. Second, Saleh, in a highly personal and unilateral

manner, declared via his (supposedly the HoR's) spokesperson that the HoR had withdrawn the confidence from Dbeibah and his cabinet, while the country was arguably preparing for the elections on December 24, 2021.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Saleh has been quite consistent and persistent in his efforts to sabotage both Dbeibah and the GNU or even the U.N.-led process altogether, taking into account his equally unilateral introduction of self-styled "election laws" in the same period. Saleh's bold move to designate Bashagha as the PM was nothing but the latest ring of a chain of sustained sabotage to perpetuate his own position.

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## JUSTIFICATION/EXCUSE

The coalition-building between Saleh and Bashagha that culminated in the "designation" of Bashagha as the PM by the HoR was grounded on the failure to hold elections on time, namely on December 24, 2021. Saleh-Bashagha and other anti-Dbeibah figures argue that since the GNU is an interim government that is responsible for carrying the country to elections among its other responsibilities, its failure thereof removes its legitimacy as the Libyan government. This argument would stand if only the "failure" to hold the elections was exclusively the failure of Dbeibah and the GNU. However, the reality is far from that. It is true that Dbeibah and the GNU did not do their best to make elections

<sup>2</sup> "Libya: 'Historic Moment' as the UN-led forum selects new interim leadership", *UN*, 5 February 2021, Libya: 'Historic moment' as UN-led forum selects new interim leadership | UN News.

<sup>3</sup> البرلمان الليبي يرفض خطة الميزانية المقدمه من حكومة الوحدة الوطنية, *Reuters*, 21 April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/libya-budget-parliament-ar4-idARAKBN2C72WK>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/-البرلمان-رفض-البرلمان-لبييا-لماذا-رفض-البرلمان-تحليلية-الديبية-تحليل/2216619> اعتماد ميزانية-حكومة-الديبية-تحليل

<sup>5</sup> "Libya's parliament passes no-confidence vote in unity government", *Al Jazeera*, 21 September 2021, Libya's parliament passes no-confidence vote in unity government | Khalifa Haftar News | Al Jazeera.

happen since being in power without bothering to go to elections is more comfortable for them; yet they were in no way the main saboteur of the electoral process. The discord between the executive and the HoR is quite noteworthy in this respect: When the executive cannot even get its budget proposal approved by the HoR, it is hard to think of the executive's options to push the HoR to make an election law, which is the basic necessary condition for elections. And when it comes to the election law, HoR Speaker Saleh did his best to stall the legislation, and when he came up with "one," he made sure that it was utterly unacceptable to many parties due to its both procedure and principle. Hence, elections did not take place because of a series of reasons that go beyond any single actor or entity in Libya; so the "argument" of the Saleh-Bashagha camp is a mere excuse to get rid of Dbeibah and the GNU and, even the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum's (LPDF) Roadmap altogether.

On the other hand, the fact that elections did not take place on December 24, 2021, constitutes the weak spot of Dbeibah and the GNU, and it was duly attacked by the Saleh-Bashagha camp. The Saleh-Bashagha camp got valuable ammunition in framing and marketing their move to replace the GNU thanks to the lack of elections. They simply seized the opportunity to contend for their power grab and exploited it up to the end.

## WHAT PEOPLE WANT

Ordinary Libyan people would never want this new round of strife between mainly two parties. Ideally, they would prefer to have elections, and if not, they would want the continuation of GNU under Dbeibah as the second-best option. This is all about a small political elite's own survival, concerns, and interests. Their disconnect

from the wider Libyan society was also recently corroborated by Williams.<sup>6</sup>

## REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

This latest round of disturbance in Libya did not happen in isolation from the encompassing regional and international environment. Several countries declared their endorsement of the designation of Bashagha as the new prime minister by the HoR right away such as Egypt and Russia, and other countries such as France implied their support in a relatively more indirect way.<sup>7</sup> Judging by the track record of all four countries in their engagement in Libya, their support for the Saleh-Bashagha coalition is by no means a surprise. There is a definitive continuation and consistency in these four countries' preferences and alliances in Libya along with the lineage of Haftar and Saleh, and the latest coalition between Saleh and Bashagha is nothing more than an offspring of this lineage. Bashagha, through his overtures to the "other side," turned himself in to someone acceptable in capitals like Cairo, Paris, and even Moscow, especially in post-2020. Once a villain for all these capitals simply for his hard-line revolutionary and anti-Haftar credentials, Bashagha became their favourite "Tripolitanian" actor deemed capable of ensuring and delivering their respective interests.

The capability to deliver or the failure thereof became crucial for certain capitals in adjusting their intervention in Libya. The stalemate caused by the military balance of power as

<sup>6</sup> "Emergence of rival Libyan governments can be 'worked through': UN", *Daily Sabah*, 28 March 2022, Emergence of rival Libyan governments can be 'worked through': UN | Daily Sabah.

<sup>7</sup> "Sisi and Macron discuss developments in Libya", *Middle East Monitor*, 12 February 2022, Sisi and Macron discuss developments in Libya – Middle East Monitor.

a result of Haftar's military defeat in the summer of 2020 put serious limitations on the influence of the foreign backers of Haftar, especially when it comes to extending their influence into Tripolitania, northwestern Libya. This led them to search for an actor "within" the Tripoli camp with whom these countries could work together, in addition to their cordial relations with Haftar and Saleh, for securing their respective interests in Libya. This was necessary as without having Tripoli onboard, their influence in Libya was bound to be limited and local.

France is a case in point. There has been a change of attitude for some time in French policy-making circles<sup>8</sup> in the sense that Paris is not solely betting on Haftar anymore as the one and only figure capable of delivering on French interests in Libya through military means. Instead, Paris has been looking for someone from Tripolitania with whom it could work and safeguard its interests without completely abandoning Haftar. This change in Paris' approach was primarily forced by Haftar's defeat in and subsequent retreat from Tripoli in late 2020, which consolidated the fact that Haftar reached his limits as a military actor. He could not achieve or deliver further than that. Of course, the change of conduct was not peculiar to France; rather it was the general trend in the period between October 2020 cease-fire and today. It was an epoch dominated by a political process around the LPDF rather than a military one, which made all relevant actors put their "military project" on hold and play by the rules of the political process. However, the change of conduct/approach of both France and the UAE matter more than the ones of other regional and international stakeholders in Libya when it comes to achieving a political settlement, or at least a status quo and

relative quiet. Since both France and the UAE were the most warmongering backers of Haftar's attack on Tripoli in 2019-2020 within a greater coalition of backers, their relatively recent acquiescence to a non-violent arrangement in Libya makes a relatively big difference.

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Egypt seems to be at the core of the project of putting the Saleh-Bashagha coalition in charge of the Libyan political scene. Egypt's complicity, if not agency over the Saleh-Bashagha coalition, is based on its formal reaction to the coalition-building and its long-term alliance and affinity with the members of the coalition. The Egyptian foreign ministry was the first one to endorse the designation of Bashagha as PM by the HoR, which came as the official confirmation of Cairo's support for the Saleh-Bashagha coalition.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Cairo has been consistent in its support for and close relations with both Haftar and Saleh in Libya. Haftar, the LNA, Saleh, and the HoR have all been, to varying degrees, conduits of Cairo's influence in Libya. Cairo's occasional contact with Tripolitanian actors did not amount to substituting either Haftar or Saleh as Cairo's reliable partners in Libya. Even the material and tangible gestures by Dbeibah in the form of numerous contracts with Cairo<sup>10</sup> could not gain him the minimal neutrality of the latter: Cairo proved to

9 <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2022/2/15/بين-باشاغا-والديبية-أين-تقف-مصر-وهل>

10 Sami Zaptia, "Libya signs 14 MoUs and six agreements with Egypt", *Libya Herald*, 17 September 2021, Libya signs 14 MoUs and six agreements with Egypt – Libya Herald.

8 Author interview, 4 November 2021.

be insistent on its existing allies such as Haftar and Saleh to ensure its interests. Given Saleh's strong relations with Cairo – Saleh is arguably the one with the best relations with Cairo, it is highly unlikely that Saleh made the bold move of replacing the GNU without the blessing of or at least coordination with Cairo. In fact, Saleh is known to have lobbied many Libyans to join his coalition with Bashagha through talks he held in Cairo.<sup>11</sup> Plus, the fact that Cairo already had acquiescence with Bashagha thanks to the joint ticket of Saleh-Bashagha, back in the LPDF vote for the head of the PC and PM positions<sup>12</sup>, facilitated Cairo's consent to Bashagha in the new design.

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Russia is another strong supporter of the Saleh-Bashagha coalition, again based on its preference for certain reliable partners within Libya and its formal reaction to the coalition, much like Cairo. Moscow endorsed the “new executive led by Bashagha” through a press statement<sup>13</sup> and it is not hard to understand why. Very similar to Cairo, Moscow's main allies within Libya have been Haftar and Saleh with an eye on Saif al-Islam Gadhafi's prospects in the future, rather than any Tripolitanian actor.

11 Author interview, 1 March 2022.

12 “UNSMIL Announces the Lists of Candidates for the Positions of the Three-Member Presidency Council and Prime Minister”, *UNSMIL*, 5 February 2021, UNSMIL announces the lists of candidates for the positions of the three-member Presidency Council and Prime Minister | UNSMIL (unmissions.org).

13 “Russia hopes Libya's new government will unify society, diplomat says”, *TASS*, 14 February 2022, Russia hopes Libya's new government will unify society, diplomat says - World - TASS.

If the conditions of pre-2020 were prevalent in Libya, Moscow would strongly oppose any role of Bashagha in such a coalition; however, pre-2020 conditions are not fully prevalent anymore. Due to Bashagha's strong revolutionary credentials as well as his publicly anti-Russian comments<sup>14</sup>, Moscow used to have serious reservations about Bashagha. Plus, when Russian purported sociologist Maxim Shugaley was in prison in Tripoli, Russians made a propaganda movie depicting those imprisoning him as cruel extremists and Bashagha as a villain<sup>15</sup> who was supposedly responsible for the “extremists” as the interior minister. However, the Russian attitude towards Bashagha changed later, and the change was foreshadowed by a Putin confidant and the owner of Wagner PMC Yevgeny Prigozhin prior to the designation of Bashagha as the PM. Prigozhin stated that there were only three Libyan actors who are worthy of engagement: Haftar, Saleh, and Bashagha. As per Prigozhin, one of them controls the majority of Libya (Haftar); the other one controls the laws (Saleh); and the third one is capable of controlling the armed groups in northwest Libya (Bashagha).<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Shugaley's supportive social media post for the Saleh-Bashagha<sup>17</sup> coalition afterward is also a sign of a positive approach by Moscow toward the new design attempt in Libya.

14 Samer al-Atrush, “Libya to Retake Land from Russia-backed Foe Before War Ends”, *Bloomberg Quint*, 7 June 2020, Libya Says It Will Retake Two Cities Before Talks to End War (bloombergquint.com); Betul Yuruk, “Libyan minister slams Russia, urges US to help”, *AA*, 10 November 2019, Libyan minister slams Russia, urges US to help (aa.com.tr).

15 “Shugaley”, Movie by Denis Neymand, 2020, Shugaley (2020) - IMDb.

16 “Yevgeny Prigozhin: Only three personalities control the situation in Libya, the rest are just”, *Al-Wasat*, 27 December 2021, Yevgeny Prigozhin: Only three personalities control the situation in Libya, the rest are just (alwasat.ly).

17 Wolfram Lacher, “Some company for these totally organic calls by ‘local communities’ for a new oil shutdown in Libya”, *Twitter Post* Citing Maxim Shugaley's Message, 13 March 2022, Wolfram Lacher on Twitter: “Some company for these totally organic calls by ‘local communities’ for a new oil shutdown in Libya. <https://t.co/EavT1Cnz6t>” / Twitter.

By the time Saleh was consulting and coordinating with foreign capitals for his upcoming move, it is now clear that Moscow had been preparing for its invasion of Ukraine. Thus, at a time when the overwhelming attention and pressure of the West would obviously be on Russia because of Ukraine, a Libyan distraction for Western diplomacy would be a boon for Moscow. In fact, Moscow was already bothered by the nature of international diplomacy on Libya led by Stephanie Williams and was blocking her potential role as the special representative of the U.N. secretary-general in its capacity.<sup>18</sup> **The HoR's designation of Bashagha as PM is not only about changing the executive but rather about getting rid of the U.N.-led LPDF process altogether and imposing a new "process" that would be fully controlled and manipulated by Saleh in his capacity as the head of the legislative.** This aspect is especially appealing to Moscow since it entails Haftar and Saleh being at the helm of the Libyan political scene for the foreseeable future, which would preserve and perpetuate the Russian presence in the country.

## THE WAY FORWARD

If one thing is sure about the Saleh-Bashagha coalition, it is that **this is a coalition of "no elections ever"** in Libya. Although they promise to take the country to elections once they come into power after an interim period of transition, Saleh, Bashagha, Haftar, and other lesser-known components of their coalition are well aware that genuinely free and fair elections would be the end of their political and military

clout they have been enjoying. As a matter of fact, they do not owe their current positions, agency, and influence to being elected. Although the only outlier among them, Saleh was an elected figure, his election in 2014 thanks to a funny number of votes from his tiny hometown al-Qubah means very little today. He is well aware truly transparent elections would not result in him achieving a position as influential as his current post. This is the exact reason why Saleh showcased textbook spoiling since last year through a series of manoeuvres, from withdrawing confidence from the GNU to issuing unilateral and questionable "election laws," and to the latest move of creating a "parallel" road map and a "new executive."

Dbeibah does not owe his position to a popular vote, either. However, he used his very short term in office to invest in his popularity. He established himself as a highly popular political figure to an unprecedented extent by Libyan standards, thanks to his easy-going style and communication skills that were often observed in his exchanges with regular people in the streets and other social spaces and occasions. This is far from being a mere image as Dbeibah also consolidated the image with material distributions to people such as marriage grants<sup>19</sup>, the likes of which apparently boosted his popularity. As a matter of fact, chronic problems in the daily lives of Libyan people such as cash shortages, electricity outages, and garbage collection were relatively mitigated and ameliorated over the last year under Dbeibah's rule.<sup>20</sup> Dbeibah's blocked visit to the southwestern Libyan city Ghat provoked a protest by the residents against Haftar-affiliated armed

18 "Moscow and Washington clash over Stephanie Williams's succession", *Africa Intelligence*, 21 February 2022, [https://www.africaintelligence.com/north-africa\\_diplomacy/2022/02/21/moscow-and-washington-clash-over-stephanie-williams-s-succession,109735276-art](https://www.africaintelligence.com/north-africa_diplomacy/2022/02/21/moscow-and-washington-clash-over-stephanie-williams-s-succession,109735276-art)

19 "Dbeibah inaugurates marriage support program", *The Libya Observer*, 6 September 2021, <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/dbeibah-inaugurates-marriage-support-program>

20 Author interviews throughout 2021.

groups<sup>21</sup>, which hinted at Dbeibah's appeal beyond the borders of Tripolitania.

Dbeibah is now being steered toward truly paving the way for elections by pull and push factors. The fact that he stands a greater chance than his potential rivals in elections is the main pull factor for him. This pull factor was already around before December 24, 2021, however, back then Dbeibah had the luxury of staying in office without sweating about organising elections since the holding of elections was subject to the buy-in of numerous entities and actors: **Dbeibah basically passed the buck on elections last year.** Unlike last year, Dbeibah is being seriously challenged and threatened in his interim capacity; hence he is very well aware that his interim mandate is not sustainable. The only way out for him is elections. This constitutes a rare opportunity to overcome the legitimacy crisis in Libya, and it should be tapped by the relevant stakeholders.

Despite the dire need for elections, it is not free of challenges. Those within and outside Libya who envision an authoritarian rule for the country will do anything in their power to prevent free and fair elections from happening. The only type of election these actors would allow is the one that is dubious enough to ensure the success of figures who envision authoritarianism. Unfortunately, the zeitgeist is not on the side of

elections in Libya, either. Since 2011 and 2014, both Egypt and Tunisia had serious spill-over effects on Libya from the toppling of Gadhafi to the rise of Haftar. Whilst Egypt is already under an authoritarian rule, and there is a decisive turn toward authoritarianism in North Africa amid widespread approval from the world, it is hard to imagine that the international community will persist with the elections in Libya.

Western diplomacy is too preoccupied with Ukraine and will be for the foreseeable future. The UNSMIL is in a weaker position without the leadership of a special representative, which is probably the reason for its placating of Saleh and Cairo<sup>22</sup> despite their challenge of the UNSMIL and the LPDF Roadmap. Lastly, the oil blockades imposed by forces loyal to Haftar<sup>23</sup> as well as Bashagha's repetitive attempts to enter Tripoli as a PM run the risk of triggering a new round of hot conflict. We are yet to see whether the U.S. or the Western alliance, in general, will take a harsher stance against the Russian presence in Libya in the light of the invasion of Ukraine. Without a meaningful pressure against the Russian presence in Libya, the current status quo, i.e. interim authorities with legitimacy issues, geographic and institutional division, sporadic armed standoffs, oil blockades, etc. will persist.

21 "Haftar blocking Dbeibah visit shows ongoing friction: Sources", *Daily Sabah*, 30 April 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/africa/haftar-blocking-dbeibah-visit-shows-ongoing-friction-sources>

22 Safa Alharathy, "HoR, HCS to start talks in Cairo on constitutional rules for elections", *The Libya Observer*, 13 April 2022, HoR, HCS to start talks in Cairo on constitutional rules for elections | The Libya Observer.

23 "Haftar oil blockade causes over \$4 bln. Loss for Libya", *Anadolu Agency*, 29 May 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/oil/haftar-oil-blockade-causes-over-4-bln-loss-for-libya/29418>

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## A TALE OF TWO PRIME MINISTERS

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