

# UN in the Arab World

January 2013

## **BENGHAZI SO FAR:**

## **A View From Inside The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL)**

Georges Nasr

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The United Nations in the Arab World Program (UNAW) was launched with the objective of exploring and analyzing the role of the United Nations (UN) in the Arab World and the impact it has had on regional politics and societies.

By organizing research studies, lectures, roundtable discussions, and workshops, the Program hopes to bring together scholars and decision-makers to discuss salient issues that fall under the spectrum of the UN's operations in the Arab World.

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## BENGAZI SO FAR

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I joined the UN Support Mission in Libya, known by its acronym UNSMIL, in early 2012 as Head of Office in Benghazi. Established by Security Council resolution 2009, the Mission's mandate is to support Libya's democratic transition by facilitating political dialogue and delivering targeted technical support in the areas of electoral assistance, constitution drafting, human rights, transitional justice and public security. UNSMIL also has a mandate to support Libyan authorities in coordinating the flow of international assistance to each of these sectors and aligning it to the country's emerging needs.

This daunting mandate was the backdrop to my arrival in Benghazi on 23 February 2012 to assume my duties. Of course, much critical work had preceded me. From the earliest days of the revolution, the UN had been engaged actively in post-conflict planning for Libya, both from New York and intermittently on the ground in Benghazi. There, my predecessor and other members of her team made a formidable start by establishing key relationships with the political actors and activists who underpinned the revolution. An alert and indefatigable woman seasoned in the business of international affairs, she provided me with a detailed briefing of political dynamics in eastern Libya and the organisational issues the Benghazi Office would need to tackle. There were many intricacies to the tasks ahead but as I walked away from our dizzying discussion, I felt that I had one amalgamated target; simply to take that work forward and set down deeper UNSMIL roots in Benghazi and the east. As a start-up mission in a start-up democracy, I could foresee that the road ahead for the Benghazi Office would be challenging and fascinating.

Where to begin? That at least was simple. Start as the revolution did: with people. I set about meeting revolutionaries, politicians, military and security officials, academics and ordinary Libyans (if there is any such thing after the remarkable events of 2011). All would have a stake in determining the country's future trajectory. The majority viewed UNSMIL as an important cog in the country's delicate transition. In some cases, this was accompanied by the perception that the UN was a one-stop shop for all of Libya's needs. This was not surprising but it did mean that working with Libyans on this road to recovery necessitated an explanation of our role as political facilitators and technical advisors. Defining what we could offer and establishing priorities would be the first step towards a successful relationship for the future.

Fulfilling our mandate meant having a team able to do so. When I arrived in Benghazi, the Office was sparsely populated. It was comprised of an administrative assistant who was necessarily a jack-of-all-trades, an attentive field security officer, a human rights expert, a clerical assistant and two drivers. An immediate task was to recruit national staff, those indispensable colleagues who would work alongside me in navigating Benghazi's political streets. I also needed to ensure the quick deployment of the rest of the team, notably the two police advisors and six electoral officers, all of whom would be at the forefront of the UN's assistance in the lead up to national elections just a few months away.

Anyone working in the start-up phase of a mission will be acutely aware that the relationship between supply and demand of assets is never in one's favour. This situation was no different. Both human and physical resources were scarce and hotly contested among managers, each eager to operationalise their respective sections as soon as possible. The support we required ranged from the mundane (printers, scanners, petty cash facilities and the delegation of authority to spend it) to the critical (language assistants, the armoured cars in which we are obliged to travel and the drivers that would operate them). Much, if not all, needed to be secured and transported from Tripoli or identified in Benghazi. Neither is a particularly straightforward process given the unpredictable journey of 1,100 kilometres between the two cities, irregular flight schedules, restrictive UN procurement procedures, and the difficulties of sourcing specific technical equipment in Benghazi. On the receiving end of all my requests, and similarly those of my colleagues, was the Mission Support Section. Like a parent bird feeding its family, it had to distribute precious resources amongst the competing mouths of its squawking young.

The search for a residence in which to house the Benghazi Office, which quickly leapfrogged to 13 internationals,

was a parallel priority. Naturally, the safety and security staff is the overarching determinant of where and how we operate in country. Upon my arrival, Benghazi was celebrated as a pocket of relative stability in Libya. This provided us with some flexibility in identifying a residence and workspace. In the period that followed security became unpredictable, sometimes dramatically so. Repetitive attacks took place against international targets, including two that us. This reduced our parameters considerably and a compound was no longer deemed appropriate. What began as a temporary stint in Benghazi's Tibesti Hotel turned into a considerably longer stay.

It is safe to say that the glory days of the Tibesti Hotel are well behind it. It proved to be a highly impractical option as a residence-cum-workspace. The EU, with its more compact presence and muscular budget, was able to section half an entire floor for itself and re-configure its physical space. However, our claustrophobic rooms served simultaneously as offices, conference rooms, laundry rooms, dining rooms and of course, living rooms. An audible sigh of reluctance would always greet interlocutors who frequently wanted to meet me in the dark lobby or coffee shop of that tired hotel, as opposed to other locations in the city I would propose. The very tenuous internet facility provided by the hotel made essential communication with colleagues and loved ones practically impossible, adding another stratum of pressure. Thankfully, after considerable lobbying, our IT section threw us a buoy in the form of several portable internet devices, themselves a rarity given the inability of the Libya Telecom and Technology Company to keep up with demand.

The Tibesti was not immune from the intermittent insecurity that prevailed in Benghazi. The hotel's own bomb disposal squad, courtesy of a contract with one of the revolutionary brigades in the city, came in useful on 29 July 2012 when an improvised explosive device was located close to the entrance of the hotel in circumstances that remain unclear. Moreover, as a landmark in Benghazi and a government-run hotel, the Tibesti serves as lightning rod for public demonstrations in a city whose Local Council is itself struggling to identify suitable office premises (let alone assist in securing ours). This was acutely demonstrated on 7 August when a small but determined group of war-wounded amputees barricaded themselves at the entrance and shutting down the hotel altogether. Tragically, none seemed a day older than 25 years. They had launched this act of defiance to protest the lack of government support to their recovery process. After a period in which our business operations ground to a halt, we relocated our offices for the second time in four months and sought to re-establish ourselves in another Benghazi hotel.

Very suddenly, all of the above became no more than a minor inconvenience when compared with the upheaval that was to follow the 11 September attack on the United States' diplomatic office in Benghazi. Following the death of Ambassador Stevens and three other US personnel, UNSMIL relocated temporarily staff from Benghazi to Tripoli, a precautionary move given the fog and uncertainty surrounding that event and its repercussions. After hurried packing of our 15 kilogram 'run bags', staff undertook the 13-hour drive to UNSMIL-HQ in Tripoli. The majority of Libyans, horrified by the events of that day understood our move for what it was - an act of prudence in light of unreadable situation.

Our work continued, albeit it from afar in Tripoli. In fact, it intensified significantly as we sought to understand the implications recent events had for Libya but also for us. However, working from a distance is to do so with a handicap - there is little substitute for face-to-face interaction in our line of work - and we soon found ways of being in Benghazi, albeit for shorter and irregular periods of time. Yet, our longer-term sights remained set on a permanent return and on deepening our roots in the east. So, no sooner did we arrive in Tripoli than we formulated options for our permanent return. As individuals, any of us would have been happy to return almost immediately. Yet, as an organisation, we carry baggage from where UN staff have lost their lives. The list is tragically long so decisions to return to areas of risk are taken soberly and conditionally.

Yet another justification for caution was illustrated on 12 January 2013 when Italy's much admired and long-serving consul in Benghazi found himself under armed attack. He was unharmed - this is why governments spend on armoured vehicles - and a small rally but sincere took place the following day to express solidarity with him.

Since then, events in Mali, Algeria and reports of elevated levels of threat to westerners in Benghazi have hardly made decision-making on a permanent return any easier. Nonetheless, like any good team seeking to manage the unknown, we have developed plan B – and plan C if necessary - that enables us to engage with counterparts in Benghazi and the east as a whole. Instinct tells me that, sooner or later, we're heading east.



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