

# **Interview with Mustafa Ali Rugibani, Head of the Libyan Delegation to the Holy See**

by

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*Lorenzo Siggillino, Junior Research Fellow at the CGSRS, sits down with Mustafa Rugibani, Head of the Libyan delegation to the Holy See to discuss the present situation of Libya, its progresses in the formation of a government of national unity and challenges in the face of terrorism intensification after the fall of Gaddafi.*

**M**ustafa Rugibani is the Head of the Libyan delegation to the Holy See. He was born in Libya and formerly worked in business. In opposition to Muammar Gaddafi, he left Libya in 1979 and returned in 2006. He contributed to the 17<sup>th</sup> February 2011 protest organized by all opposition forces paired with exiled Libyans. After the revolution, he joined the National Transition Congress (NTC) and was appointed Minister of Labour in the first democratically elected Government after the Gaddafi era. Now he is committed to strengthening Libyan relations with the Vatican, while actively participating in cultural and religious dialogues. Mustafa Rugibani was nominated for the position of Prime Minister in the unity government Libya is trying to establish alongside the United Nations. The legislative authorities of both governments rejected the plan proposed by Bernardino Leon, head of the United Nations Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) in autumn. As a consequence, the Spanish diplomat was replaced by Martin Kobler a few days after this interview was conducted. Recently, Tobruk and Tripoli have reached an agreement on the new plan for a unity government proposed by the UN, but the new document is pending ratification by legislative institutions.

**Lorenzo Siggillino:** Despite a near universal understanding in Libyan institutions and civil society that unity government is the only possible option, administrations in Tripoli and Tobruk resisted the programme proposed by Leon. Why?

**Mustafa Rugibani:** In my opinion the only solution to the Libyan crisis is the Government of National Accord (GNA). On this point, the UN should be very quick to replace Leon, and the GNA should move very fast to get this agreement and start the implementation. This government should bring security, stability, unification, should solve the issue of public salaries, start economic programmes, foster employment in order to ease the disarmament of tribes, militias and young individuals. Leon, on 12 July 2015, had the agreement signed by the internationally recognised government, then he started to make mistakes. He started changing the agreement, instead of focusing on negotiating with the other government. The result was that both governments were dissatisfied with the new text. Moreover, he proposed potential ministers. It would have been better to focus only on the prime minister and his deputies. Leon should have left the disputed points. Later these could have been resolved by rival institutions. Obviously, the main problem was that the UN envoy started negotiating with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for his next job. This made him lose credibility. When you are working as a mediator, you cannot negotiate privately with one of the parties.

**After a unity government is established, Libya could start thinking about the issues it has to solve. What are the priorities of a potential unity government? I am thinking for example about immigration, disarmament, terrorism.**

The unity government must deal urgently with many crucial matters: political, social, economic, and most importantly, security issues. It is critical to emphasize the problem of salaries: for many months, government employees have not been paid. Furthermore, many schools remain closed. They must be reopened. The Health service must begin to function normally again. Economic reform is required, so that Libyans could start making a living. New development targets will have to be set. The issue of illegal migration will have to be tackled. In this complex scenario Libya will be looking to its regional friends and to the international community. We need these actors' assistance and support.

Security is a double-edged sword: on one hand, the country is militarily divided, and on the other there is the battle against terrorists (ISIS). Regarding security, the new Government needs to be able to operate safely in Tripoli. Currently, there is no control on it. Instead, many extremist groups and militias are active in the city.

**How important is the support of European countries, in stabilizing and solving the crucial issues we mentioned?**

European support and help is critical to the new Government. This help can be extended to all, or most government programmes. In particular, regarding the projects related to illegal immigrants, European states should assist Libya with our border control. European countries also should provide financial backing for these programmes.

**What are the main steps in fighting human traffickers? Probably more collaboration with neighbouring countries like Chad, Niger, Sudan is fundamental.**

All neighbouring countries should cooperate in the areas of intelligence and border control to fight human trafficking. The new government has to consider this issue as one of its priorities. The Italian government also must work with the new government on this point. Libyan coasts are 2.000 km long. Our borders with other countries are around 7.000 km in length, are mostly desert which is very difficult to monitor. Libya needs assistance to control both the coast and the boundaries. Europe is much more aware of people who perish in the sea. However, many individuals do not make it to the sea because they die in the desert. We have to avoid this. In my opinion, it would be fundamental to build facilities in the South of Libya, in order to provide medical assistance, screen immigrants, detect who should be sent back to his or her home country and who is entitled to go to Europe. Some of the migrants also could be employed in Libya. We import a part of our labour force and immigrants with useful skills should be welcome, if they want to stay. Also, cooperation with our neighbours will be fundamental. At present, Libya does not cooperate with Algeria, Tunisia, Chad, Niger and Sudan. These states also are scared of the current situation in Libya. The new government should immediately start a dialogue with them, as their collaboration is needed for effective border control.

**In Libya, local factions have been fundamental in fighting terrorist organizations. Could you describe the situation in your country? How many groups are merging into the Islamic State?**

In Libya today there are several groups controlling some cities. The city of Derna is occupied by two groups (ISIS and Ansar al Sharia), Ansar al Sharia is very strong in the city of Benghazi. The city of Sirte still has an ISIS presence. In Tripoli, there are a few pockets of Salafees, as well as Ansar al Sharia, and cells affiliated with ISIS. In the city of Sabrata, crucial for the journey of immigrants to Europe, there is an important presence of Salafees.

**Western countries are worried about the threat of terrorism, however; some cells are created and developed inside national boundaries. Why, in your opinion, is the Islamic State able to attract so many individuals in Europe?**

There are many reasons why ISIS is able to attract so many young individuals in Europe. First of all, in my opinion, this is due to their heavy propaganda machine, and this is connected to the attitude of the international community: The coalition against terrorism lacks a strategy, because there is no agreement on the objectives in Syria. This is dangerous because ISIS can claim its strength in its propaganda, and we are giving them a powerful tool. Secondly, unemployment among Arabs and Muslims is very high in European countries. Members of both groups often are subject to different treatment and they feel frustrated. I am not necessarily speaking of discrimination. I am referring to systems in which it is difficult to emerge if you are not wealthy. ISIS can attract these kinds of people with money. The Islamic State can offer high salaries, many young individuals can accept and absorb the extremist ideology proposed to them. It is impossible to

know how many individuals in Europe back this terrorist group. In part because there are probably some silent pockets, persons who covertly back ISIS. This likely is because the organization for the moment asked them only for passive support.

**Terrorism has caused massacres in Yemen, Libya, Egypt, France, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and elsewhere. The Islamic State also has targeted Russia, Great Britain, and the US. Despite the large number of affected countries, we still lack something to fight this threat effectively. What do you think that is?**

Countries fighting ISIS have two credible figures regarding the number of fighters deployed by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. This figure could be 30.000 or 80.000 individuals, and they control a territory inhabited by around 10 million people. All countries involved in the struggle against them have disparate agendas. Iran has one agenda, France has another, Russia has their own, and so on. Further, no war can be won with air strikes alone. At some point, an agreement should be reached on ground operations. The United States should have intervened at an earlier stage, when the debate started. The more Assad remains in power, the more suffering he will cause to the population, and the more he will damage the territory. If the international community would have waited a few extra weeks to intervene in 2011, Gaddafi would have seriously ruined some areas. This frequently happens when a dictator understands he can no longer remain in power.

**In your opinion how much does Syria impact on it? I think one of the big problems in fighting the Islamic State is the question of who will govern Syria after Assad?".**

When protests began in Syria, Libya supported the opposition, in order to encourage the democratic revolution. After the human rights violations he has committed and the deaths of so many civilians, Assad cannot remain in power. Also, his community, the Alawi, has made an official statement dissociating itself from him. The only solution is to negotiate a transition period in which Assad remains on the political scene, but with very limited authority. The transition period should last longer than one year. In the meantime, transition authorities should work on a new constitution and set elections for new institutions. Following free elections, a Sunni government probably will be established. There is a large Sunni community in Libya, in addition to Christians, and a small number of Shias. However, the new government, irrespective of its religious orientations, should guarantee to Iran that Shia holy places will be preserved. This issue is very important for Iran. Tehran likely wants this kind of reassurance before it will accept the removal of Assad. Russia for its part needs to be reassured of good relations with the new government. Assad is geopolitically very important to Russian President Vladimir Putin. This is so mainly because of access to the Mediterranean Sea, which Moscow views as critical for military, commercial, and strategic reasons.