

# International recognition played a crucial role in giving Libyan political actors sovereignty, study shows

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Libya's various governments in the past decade have played a crucial role in the shaping the course of the conflict in the country, a new study shows.

Contact with and support by other countries have affected the identity, resources, legitimacy and sovereignty held by political actors and those challenging them.

Governments sometimes hesitate or refuse to recognize the governments of other countries in response to contentious domestic political processes such as coups d'état, revolutions, and [civil wars](#). This has included Libya, where there have been overlapping phases of revolution, international military intervention, and civil war since 2011, and two parallel governments since 2014.

A new study argues that this international (non)-recognition of governments has its own power, as it can create change. It also argues it is geopolitically inevitable, as other countries cannot avoid engaging with those running other nations.

Dr. Irene Fernández-Molina, from the University of Exeter, interviewed diplomats, international officials, and other practitioners in Tunis and Brussels in early 2019. [The study](#) is published in the *International Studies Review*.

Dr. Fernández-Molina said, "I found that international recognition plays a crucial role in drawing and redrawing the sovereignty held by governing authorities in Libya and those challenging them. The non-

recognition of the parallel governments of Tripoli in 2014 to 2015 and Bayda since late 2015 decisively contributed to shrinking their ability to act at all levels.

"The international recognition of governments is geopolitically inevitable, as other nations cannot escape having to choose which [political actors](#) in another country to deal with at different points in time, and with which degree of closeness, directness, and formality. Only governments in exile are an exception to this rule."

The study is further evidence of how the [international community](#) has had few ways to engage in Libya diplomatically or provide resources in the past decade, and how relationships have changed according to which administration has been in place.

Dr. Fernández-Molina said, "Red lines about relationships shifted, leading to changes in contact and recognition, although there were still plenty of nuances and inconsistencies. The boundaries between informal and formal engagement were often porous and the sovereignty line separating state and non-state actors was increasingly blurred. The overall lesson conveyed in my interviews was that a [government's](#) legitimacy cannot thrive by itself without effectiveness, and when in doubt, effectiveness ultimately trumps legitimacy."

These different forms of contacts were the result of Western states wanting a "regular" Libyan partner to cooperate in tackling terrorism and controlling migration. After 2017, support was given to the Libyan state and other non-state organizations as part of a move towards a more decentralized, non-governmental and inclusive approach related to growing skepticism about the strength, centrality, capacity and durability of the Government of National Accord (GNA) as well as its problematic performance in migration cooperation.

International support included humanitarian and development assistance; post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction; political transition, state-building, and democratic governance; and security support. Other nations also trained Libyan security forces.

The successive internationally recognized governments in post-2011 Libya haven't gained sufficient domestic recognition.

**More information:** Irene Fernández-Molina, The International Recognition of Governments in Practice(s): Creatures, Mirages, and Dilemmas in Post-2011 Libya, *International Studies Review* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/isr/viad050](https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viad050)

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