



Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy
and International Affairs

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UN in the Arab World

October 2012

Insight into the UN in Libya:

Interview with Dr. Tarek Mitri,
Head of the United Nations Support
Mission in Libya (UNSMIL)

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In 2009, the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) launched the United Nations in the Arab World Program with the objective of exploring and analyzing the role of the United Nations (UN) in the Arab region 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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Dr. Tarek Mitri, Senior Fellow at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), on October 15th 2012, began his appointment as the Special Representative for the Secretary-General at the United Nations, and Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL). Dr. Mitri will be spending the year in this capacity, working closely with the Libyan government and civil society, aiding the process of institution building and security stabilization, as well as work with international actors playing a role in Libya. In this interview for IFI's United Nations in the Arab World Program (IFI-UN), Dr. Mitri shares his expectations and anticipations on the work of the United Nations (UN) in Libya and the situation in Libya, as he prepares to begin his new post.

*The following interview is an edited transcript of the interview with Dr. Tarek Mitri that was conducted on October 15th 2012, with Dr. Karim Makdisi, Associate Director of IFI and Faculty Research Director of IFI-UN program, and Samar Ghanem, the Program Coordinator.

United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL):

"In its Resolution 2040 (12 March 2012), article 6, the Security Council tasked the Mission, in full accordance with the principles of national ownership, to assist the Libyan authorities to define national needs and priorities throughout Libya, and to match these with offers of strategic and technical advice where appropriate, and support Libyan efforts in five main areas:

- Managing Process of Democratic Transition
- Promoting Rule of Law and Human Rights
- Restoring Public Security
- Countering illicit proliferation of all arms and securing Libya's borders
- Coordinating International Assistance"

For more information: <http://unsmil.unmissions.org/>

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Interview with Dr. Tarek Mitri

IFI-UN: How did the job come about? And what do you think your best qualifications for the job are?

TM: Well, it's an unsolicited and unanticipated appointment. It looks like my name had come in a list of possible candidates, drawn by senior staff of the UN in the Arab World, and it looks like, I should use the word "looks like", because I don't know, I don't have the full story, it looks like my name was taken due note of by the Secretary-General, and they called me and asked if I was interested, and after some hesitation I said yes. And then I was shortlisted and the chosen by the Secretary-General, this is a choice that the Secretary-General makes, because it is a position, I'm the Special Representative to the Secretary General and I am accountable to him, so it is a decision he makes. I think the fact that I am an Arab has played into this appointment, because, the fact that the Libyans – some of them knew me some of them did not, some of them knew Lebanon – the fact that the Libyans appreciated this appointment has also helped.

IFI-UN: And your being Christian, in the sense to reinforce idea of pluralism in the region?

TM: No. No. Those who know me know...

IFI-UN: In a positive way, in the sense to introduce them...

TM: The fact that I had spent a significant period in my life working on intercultural and interreligious dialogue, and the fact that I am a student of Islam might have contributed positively. It is hard to tell. I think it is a matter of perception, and the perception was in my favor.

IFI-UN: So in terms of what you think you can bring, what would you say are the skills that you have for this [position]? What do you think are the attributes you have, in particular for the [position] of the Special Representative, because you don't have much experience at the UN?

TM: My experience with the UN is limited to the Security Council sessions that I have attended; I have attended quite a few actually, on behalf of Lebanon [in] 2006, 2007, 2008, I was acting Foreign Minister, so my experience with the UN is limited to this. So I was not chosen because of my UN record – I have none [in terms of working within the UN bureaucracy]. I think, as I said, the fact that I am an Arab, the fact that I am Arab who is committed to the causes of freedom and democracy which were espoused by the Arab Uprising in Libya and elsewhere. The fact that I think of myself as someone who is rooted in Arab Islamic culture is certainly one of the precious tools in my work. I don't think the Libyans need a UN bureaucrat; the Libyans need someone who understands their culture, their history, their political problems and someone who helps them in institution building. Libya is a country- for all kinds of reasons- is a country that is almost institution-less, the police, the judiciary, even political institutions. Qaddafi has his own system in running Libya, he did not build institutions, not even health or educational institutions. Now this is where my Lebanese government experience comes in. I think I had the experience of someone who had to serve a country whose institutions are weak, and where parallel institutions were stronger than official institutions. Think about security, think about the military, I mean I have been in a country where political forces had more influence in terms of their military and security structures, than the military and security structures of the state itself, and that is the case comparatively. Not *Mutatis Mutandis*¹ with that of the Libyans, so I bring in this experience with that of the Libyans, nevertheless we continue to serve the state – a weak state – but a state that has the legitimacy that no one else has. And in Libya you have now an elective government, you will have soon an elective government, you have an elected congress. Therefore you have institutions that personify and incarnate the legitimacy of the state, and their legitimacy will enable them, I hope. Maybe we can provide some assistance to them, we'll help them to exercise the state sovereignty over Libya at the expense of warlords and militias, and we have seen what warlords and militias can do to a state sovereignty, we have seen that in Lebanon and I know exactly what it means. Maybe my experience in the areas of dialogue and mediation might help because national reconciliation is one of our priorities in Libya. In my previous life, before serving the Lebanese government I have been

1 Legal term meaning: "making the necessary alterations while not affecting the main point at issue", *Oxford Dictionaries*, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/mutatis%2Bmutandis> (Accessed October 22, 2012).

involved in what you may call Track Two Diplomacy, trying to solve conflicts in countries such as Bosnia, Sudan and Nigeria, and maybe this experience I acquired might be of value to me as I try to help the Libyans in their national reconciliation.

IFI-UN: What are your expectations going into this? You haven't gone to Libya yet so what are your expectations on the eve that you are supposed to go, what are expecting to find and what do you expect to do?

TM: I mean we have a set of priorities that were affirmed by the Security Council and I have to work within the framework of those priorities. There is a UN operation called UNSMIL that is already in place and they have proven to be a competent group of people, they played a significant role in the elections, they contributed to make the elections the success it has been in July of this year. I've met a few of them and I've heard about another group of staff, they seem to be very competent, and many of them Arabic speaking, that is certainly an advantage. And a number of programs are under way; some are related to the political process, constitution, referendum, general elections in 18 months. Some have to do with helping the Libyans build their security institutions and some concern the rule of law, human rights, transitional justice. That is not just about building institutions it's about also human rights culture, dealing with a number of pending problems such as those of the detainees. I will be first and foremost listening to the Libyans. These priorities are their priorities and if they choose to change them then we will be happy to adapt to what the Libyans really want. So I will be in a listening mode, I will not propose to the Libyans unless I am invited to propose.

IFI-UN: You just came back from New York where you were for 10 days, so you had a lot of meetings at the Security Council [with] security people. What can you tell us about that, and who do you see as the key players that you are going to have to deal with within the UN system?

TM: This visit to the UN was meant to help me learn a bit more about the functioning of an institution that is quite complex, an institution that I don't know from within. So I have gone through a process of induction, immersion into the life of the organization to know people that I have not met before. So that is one part of it. As important as this could be, I wanted to make sure that the mission that I will be leading in Libya enjoys the support of the Security Council. This is a mission that was created by the Security Council; this is mission that is reviewed every two months by the Security Council, so I was keen on listening to the Security Council both collectively and through its members individually. And the sense I had from the meetings I was able to organize was that in spite of their divergence, their past divergence on Libya, and sometimes continuing divergence on a number of issues, the Security Council speaks with one voice in support of UNSMIL - the United Nations mission in Libya. I heard that said in so many ways by so many people.

IFI-UN: Including the Russians?

TM: First and foremost the Russians. They were very supportive of the mission, they were candid about their disagreements which will continue with the others on foreign intervention, they disagreed on the actual wording of resolution 1973 and the subsequent resolutions that built on it, they think that there are a number of nations that are subverting from within the existing international order, I mean, their criticisms are known, its public knowledge, and they did not shy away from telling me what their criticisms are. Nevertheless they extended their full support to the mission that I will lead in Libya. That was the case of every other member of the Security Council I met, plus a few countries that are influential but are not members of the Security Council such as Germany, Italy, Norway, these are people I also saw. Now I heard the Security Council that they want the UN representative in Libya to play a role in coordinating international aid.

IFI-UN: As I understand, the Libyans end up paying [paying for the 'aid' that is being provided to them, as happened in Iraq during the reconstruction phase]?

TM: I mean to call it aid, it's not always aid, sometimes it's technical assistance, but in some cases it is aid. I have limited knowledge of what kinds of programs do individual European states or the European Union have in Libya, but they are all interested in seeing us play a coordination role. But I would be able to play that role more effectively if asked by the Libyans, and I will talk to the Libyan authorities about this, and if this is perceived as a priority for the Libyans then I am going to serve the Libyans by playing this coordination role. Last but not least, I sense that a great deal of support to the UN mission in Libya, at the level of the leadership of the United Nations Organization, at the level of the Secretary General and his immediate collaborators. They think that Libya is a place

where the UN can make some difference, modest difference I will dare say, I don't think you should place the expectations very high, but it is certainly a place where the UN... The UN in Libya has credibility, it has a history. In the 1950s, in 1951, Libya was "created" by the General Assembly after a long debate with a one majority vote. And the public perception of the UN is rather positive in Libya, and this might have enhanced the belief that UN officials have about the UN's ability to make a difference in Libya. So that is both a source of motivation for me, but it's also a heavy burden on my shoulders.

IFI-UN: Usually there is some kind of Pen Holder²; in this case is it the UK or the Italians or the French who are the lead in the Security Council, or the Europeans as a whole?

TM: I mean in the Security Council, Europeans do not speak necessarily with one voice. They have a self-understanding, the so-called P5³; each of them has a self-understanding of being a major power. And the interest in things Libyan is very, very high. Not only the UN believes it may be able to make a difference in Libya, every major European country that is on the Security Council or not on the Security Council, like Germany or Italy, believe that Libya is a place where success is possible and everybody wants to have their share in making this success possible.

IFI-UN: Just a couple more questions to wrap up. As a USG (Under-Secretary-General) it is actually two jobs wrapped into one; as the head of the mission and you are also special representative. We talked earlier very briefly [off the record] about the potentially confusing question of your lines of authority, so you are dealing with DPK (Department of Peacekeeping Operations) and also the DPA (Department of Political Affairs) but your line of authority is directly under the Secretary-General's office. The questions of security, just very quickly, you underwent security training or sensitivity. Are there problems or will there be problems with security issues there? The UN has built a second compound.

TM: It is still early for me to say anything. But I mean the UN had in the past, some most unfortunate security problems, and the more recent ones being the bombings in Abuja (Nigeria), and after that in Algiers (Algeria) and of course in Baghdad (Iraq) and in Kabul (Afghanistan), so they are very keen on taking all possible security measures to provide their personnel's safety, and I will certainly have not just a moral obligation, but also a professional obligation as the Designated Officer for security, I'll have the obligation to make sure that the security component is factored in some of the decisions we ought to take about offices, in Libyan towns, about staff mobility, about the headquarters of the UN. It's too early for me to make any decision, I have not yet made my assessment of the situation, but who am I to make an assessment? I think there are experts in this field and I was told there are good experts that will help me take the right decisions, but we also, notwithstanding the fragility of the Libyan security services, but we will work closely with the Libyans. I think it is the Libyan responsibility also to protect the United Nations in Libya, and we shall count on it, as much support and protection that we may get from the Libyans.

IFI-UN: Are you there to build a state, to create a state? I know the priorities are the political process, dealing and coordinating aid, this kind thing, but stripped down to essentials, do you see yourself as helping to build a state there?

TM: I think we see ourselves as assisting the Libyans in the process of state building. There are specific institutions that are crucial in this process, that is the transitional justice institutions, the security institutions and the political institutions are probably more with the ambit of our mission than educational or health institutions for the time being. But it's certainly, the primary task is offering technical assistance and advice if needed and requested. I said we will propose to the Libyans if invited to do so, and we'll offer the best of technical assistance.

IFI-UN: And are you allowed to talk to everybody?

TM: Oh certainly.

2 The UN delegation which is responsible for writing the first draft of a resolution, *United Nations Multilingual Terminology Database*, <http://unterm.un.org/dgaacs/unterm.nsf/WebView/E77E1B6A46D6521B85257A360065D59B?OpenDocument> (Accessed October 22, 2012).

3 The five permanent members of the Security Council: China, the United States, the United Kingdom, Russian, and France, *United Nations Multilingual Terminology Database*, <http://unterm.un.org/dgaacs/unterm.nsf/WebView/54A3558D77E5F96885256A000007744B?OpenDocument> (Accessed October 22, 2012).

IFI-UN: There are no groups that are off limit?

TM: Certainly. Of course our major interlocutor is the Libyan government, but we will be talking to all political forces in Libya...

IFI-UN: There is nobody excluded?

TM: Civil Society organizations as it is now fashionable to call them that are proliferating in Libya; there are both local and international NGOs that are in the hundreds. I won't spend my life talking to them, but I think we will touch base. And some of them have an invaluable contribution to make; some governments actually outsourced their programs to NGOs and given them the funds necessary to do their work. No but there are no restriction on the people we will be talking to, but our privileged interlocutor are the Libyan authority.

IFI-UN: You are there for a year more or less?

TM: I have a one year contract, a little less a little more, I don't know, but I am not starting a new career [in the UN]. UNSMIL I was told will stay on for 3, 4, 5 years. But I don't think I will stay.

IFI-UN: We would like to know how effective you think that mission in particular could be, from your first impressions?

TM: What I have been hearing right, left and center, is that this is a mission that has great potential. I am trying to lower the expectations, because when the expectations are high...

IFI-UN: So the best case scenario would be that a year from now everyone is in discussion and dialogue, the government will function properly, and the security situation has stabilized?

TM: One year for the security situation to stabilize is a reasonable time-frame, for the political process to mature you need another two years because they haven't even started drafting the constitution. That will take six months, eight months, maybe more. Then you will have to have a referendum on the constitution and then general elections. They don't have a parliament now; they have a general congress, which is kind of a constituent assembly. So the political process will take longer. And the reconciliation process goes slowly I think. Building the security institutions and even the judiciary institutions may go faster.

IFI-UN: As a final question, do you think that a country like Libya, and many of these kinds of countries should go with a Lebanese model, for better or for worst, try to make a patchwork of things, in a kind of a state? Or is the goal sort of a western liberal state that has all these difference mechanisms and institutions in place that are formal institutions?

TM: You know the Libyan society is a rather homogeneous society unlike Lebanon. They're Arab, Sunni, Malikis.

IFI-UN: But they are tribal.

TM: Yes but it's easier to deal with tribal difference than with communal differences like the ones we have in Lebanon. And I think that if we compare with Libya, although I don't like to compare, but there is a demand and desire for a strong state, for the rule of law. I'm not sure in Lebanon - there is a desire amongst us here - but I'm not sure that many of the political and communal forces, especially those who have arms, have a genuine desire for the rule of law, the way the Libyans seem to have. I think there is the chance of building a normal state, a state with functioning institutions, a democracy.

IFI-UN: To incorporate all these militias into the state itself, that's the goal?

TM: It should be easier than Lebanon. Whether that will happen or not, I don't know. But even the heads of militias say "we're prepared" and some are voluntarily giving back their arms to the state, which is something that did not happen in Lebanon. Comparison is difficult, but the chances of doing that in Libya are comparatively high.