

ANALYTICAL

The International Recognition of Governments in Practice(s): Creatures, Mirages, and Dilemmas in Post-2011 Libya

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The international (non)recognition of governments is a composite macro practice that has grown in visibility in recent years in response to contentious domestic political processes such as coups d'état, revolutions, and civil wars, yet it remains understudied in international relations. Doctrinal debates in international law and foreign policy reveal the normative vacuum and normative competition that have long surrounded this phenomenon, but say little about its specific operation and effects. This article brings together insights from recognition theory and international practice theory, and uses post-2011 Libya as an in-depth case study, drawing on elite interviews with diplomats, international officials, and other practitioners. The aim is to sketch a new research agenda by building a generalizable typology of smaller-scale government recognition micro practices (declaratory, diplomatic, informal engagement, intergovernmental cooperation, and support practices), and uncovering their guiding logics and consequences. I argue that, first, the international (non)recognition of governments is endowed with a distinct generative power, as it produces its own creatures through a range of micro practices that have identity formation and change, material empowerment, political legitimation, and sovereignty line-drawing effects. Secondly, it is geopolitically inevitable, as external actors involved in a country cannot ultimately avoid engaging with territorially grounded domestic political actors. Thirdly, it is not a black-and-white situation, as it involves a broad variety of practices guided by different, often contradictory logics. Finally, international government recognition practices are likely to run into three dilemmas stemming from three tensions: international versus domestic recognition, legitimacy versus effectiveness, and coherence versus inclusivity in conflict mediation.

El (no) reconocimiento internacional de los Gobiernos es una práctica compuesta a nivel macro que ha ido creciendo en visibilidad en los últimos años como respuesta a procesos políticos internos de carácter contencioso, tales como golpes de Estado, revoluciones y guerras civiles. Sin embargo, esta práctica sigue siendo poco estudiada en el ámbito de las RRII. Los debates doctrinales existentes tanto en el campo del derecho internacional como en el campo de la política exterior revelan el vacío y la competencia normativos que han caracterizado durante mucho tiempo a este fenómeno. Sin embargo, estos ofrecen poca información acerca de su funcionamiento y sus efectos específicos. Este artículo reúne ideas

procedentes de la teoría del reconocimiento y de la teoría de las prácticas internacionales, y utiliza un exhaustivo estudio de caso relativo a la Libia posterior a 2011, basado en entrevistas de élite con diplomáticos, funcionarios internacionales y otros profesionales. El objetivo es esbozar una nueva agenda de investigación, mediante la creación de una tipología generalizable de microprácticas en materia de reconocimiento gubernamental a menor escala (prácticas declarativas, diplomáticas, de contacto informal, de cooperación intergubernamental y de apoyo), así como llegar a descubrir sus lógicas rectoras y sus consecuencias. Argumentamos que, en primer lugar, el (no) reconocimiento internacional de los Gobiernos está dotado de un poder generativo característico, ya que produce sus propias criaturas a través de una serie de microprácticas que tienen efectos de formación y cambio de identidad, de empoderamiento material, de legitimación política y de trazado de líneas de soberanía. En segundo lugar, esto resulta geopolíticamente inevitable, ya que los agentes externos involucrados en un determinado país no pueden, en última instancia, evitar comprometerse con los agentes políticos nacionales territoriales. En tercer lugar, no se trata de una situación de extremos (o blanco o negro), ya que implica una amplia variedad de prácticas guiadas por lógicas diferentes, a menudo contradictorias. Por último, es probable que las prácticas internacionales en materia de reconocimiento gubernamental se enfrenten a tres dilemas derivados de tres tensiones: reconocimiento internacional frente a reconocimiento interno, legitimidad frente a efectividad, y coherencia frente a inclusividad en la mediación de conflictos.

La (non-)reconnaissance internationale des gouvernements est une macropratique composite qui a gagné en visibilité ces dernières années en réponse aux processus politiques internes contestés comme les coups d'État, les révolutions et les guerres civiles. Pourtant, elle reste sous-étudiée en RI. Les débats quant à la doctrine en droit international et en politique étrangère révèlent le vide et la concurrence normatifs qui ont longtemps entouré ce phénomène, mais en disent peu sur le fonctionnement ou les effets spécifiques. Cet article rassemble des enseignements issus de la théorie de la reconnaissance et de la théorie des pratiques internationales, et utilise la Libye d'après-2011 comme étude de cas approfondie, en se fondant sur des entretiens avec les élites : diplomates, fonctionnaires internationaux et autres professionnels. Il vise à esquisser un nouveau programme de recherche en construisant une typologie généralisable de micropratiques de reconnaissance de gouvernements de petite échelle (déclaratoires, diplomatiques, interactions informelles, coopération intergouvernementale et pratiques de soutien) et en révélant leurs logiques directrices et conséquences. D'abord, j'affirme que la (non-)reconnaissance internationale de gouvernements est dotée d'un pouvoir de génération distinct, car elle produit ses propres créatures par le biais d'un éventail de micropratiques qui possèdent des effets de formation et de modification de l'identité, d'émancipation matérielle, de légitimation politique et de fixation de limites de souveraineté. Puis, elle est inévitable sur le plan géopolitique, car les acteurs externes qui interviennent dans un pays ne peuvent pas en dernier ressort éviter d'interagir avec les acteurs politiques nationaux et ancrés territorialement. Ensuite, il ne s'agit pas d'une situation « tout blanc ou tout noir », car elle implique un large éventail de pratiques, orientées par des logiques différentes, et souvent contradictoires. Enfin, les pratiques internationales de reconnaissance de gouvernements rencontrent souvent trois dilemmes issus de trois tensions : reconnaissance internationale ou nationale, légitimité ou efficacité, et cohérence ou inclusivité en médiation des conflits.

Introduction

On January 23, 2019, the head of Venezuela's opposition-majority National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, swore an oath to assume the country's interim presidency in an unprecedented challenge to Nicolás Maduro's re-election the previous year, which this legislative body had declared invalid. The United States immediately expressed official recognition of Guaidó as acting president of Venezuela, with a majority of members of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the European Union (EU) followed suit despite his self-proclaimed government's lack of effective control over any of the country's territory and population. These exceptional developments coincided with the early days of my fieldwork in Tunis, where I was interviewing diplomats and other practitioners about the politics of international recognition in Libya's post-2011 conflict. "Since you are the expert, you tell me—have we done the right thing in not recognizing Guaidó?," one of my interlocutors asked back. Such genuine question revealed widespread uncertainty about an international (macro) practice that recent years have seen growing formal resort to, and demand of, albeit with no one set meaning and no instruction manual: the international (non)recognition of governments.

From the Libyan civil war and the Venezuelan constitutional crisis to the military coup d'état in Myanmar to the Taliban takeover and proclamation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in 2021, the international recognition of governments—along with its reverse, the explicit refusal thereof—has become an increasingly salient measure associated with (liberal) international ordering and policy interventions in contentious domestic processes with regional and global security implications. Under the surface of formal public statements, though, it has always been there and always mattered in one form or another. Arguably, few international macro practices are more fundamental and consequential than that of "identifying both the primary units of the global order and the institutions that have standing to act in the name of those units" (Roth 2015, 144–5), namely recognizing states and governments. However, the latter facet of international recognition remains surprisingly arcane for policymakers given its scant legal and practical codification. In the academic literature, while there have been noteworthy seminal contributions from international law scholars (Peterson 1997; Talmon 1998; Roth 2000) and the law-politics crossover here is considerable, this substantive issue is underexplored territory for the discipline of international relations (IR) (see Kinne 2014, 258).

Post-2011 Libya provides an unparalleled point of departure for the empirical exploration and middle-range theorizing (see Bennett 2013) of the international recognition of governments in IR. This case study contains almost the whole range of typical government recognition controversies identified in the literature. Various international government (non)recognition practices played a central role in, and shaped the course of, the country's conflict throughout its overlapping phases of revolution, international military intervention, and civil war in three episodes (February–October 2011, May 2014–December 2015, and April 2019–October 2020), as well as in more stable interludes of political transition and state-building (October 2011–May 2014 and October 2020–now). At the same time, such macro and micro practices were faced with the deepening fragmentation of a country whose new "politically relevant elite" is made up of a wide number of fairly autonomous and influential local actors enjoying territorial control and/or credibility as representatives of their citizen, regional, tribal or ethnic constituencies (Lacher 2016, 64–5)—including not least "socially embedded" violent non-state actors (VNSA) (Lacher 2020, 8). This has resulted in the presence in Libya of "areas of limited statehood," that is, "parts of the territory or policy areas in which the central government lacks the capacity to implement decisions and/or its monopoly over the means of violence is challenged" (Risse 2015, 153; Melcangi and Mezran 2022, 2–4). From the international community's perspective, the problem of what

former US President Barack Obama described as “our ability to have any kind of structure there that we could interact with and start training and start providing resources” would remain a chronic headache during this long decade of “shit show” (Obama’s words) (Goldberg 2016). Formally speaking, the Libyan state institutions would see a total of four authority splits and international government recognition contests: the Muammar Gaddafi government versus the National Transitional Council (NTC) (2011), the cabinets appointed by the General National Congress (GNC) versus the House of Representatives (HoR) (2014–2015), the Government of National Accord (GNA) versus the eastern (Bayda) parallel government (2016–2021), and more recently the Government of National Unity (GNU) versus the so-called Government of National Stability (GNS) (2022–now) (see Badi 2021).

This article seeks to sketch a research agenda, paving the way for further empirical exploration and theorizing of the international recognition of governments in two ways. Empirically, I address the question of how, why, and to which effects have international actors *in practice* recognized and engaged with the various aspiring or de facto governments in Libya since 2011. This leads me, first, to unpack the composite macro practice that is the international recognition of governments (in singular) into its lesser performative components, identifying the repertoire and building a typology of smaller-scale micro practices (in plural); and second, to uncover the logics guiding the play of the latter practices as well as the problems and dilemmas they entail. Theoretically, such a twofold analytical exercise allows me to inductively abstract some core patterns and puzzles as a first step towards the middle-range theorization of the international recognition of governments as a general phenomenon.

This effort is guided by a combination of Hegelian recognition theory (Taylor 1994; Honneth 1995) and international practice theory. I consider the former’s application to IR (Greenhill 2008; Lindemann and Ringmar 2012; Agné et al. 2013; Daase et al. 2015) essential to expand our understanding of international recognition politics beyond the conventional either/or and zero-sum views inherited from international law scholarship, which in fact solely apply to legal status. For its part, the practice perspective informs my research in three key ways: first, adopting an inductive methodological approach with empirical work and detailed description as the starting point (Bueger and Gadinger 2015, 457); second, paying due attention to the constitutive and power-generating effects of specific relational international practices (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014; Sending et al. 2015); and third, making an analytical distinction between the—intersecting or clashing—social action logics of consequences (instrumental rational choice), appropriateness (norm compliance), arguing (communicative action), and practicality (habitual know-how) (March and Olsen 1998; Risse 2000; Pouliot 2008).

In terms of methodology and sources, the Libya case study focuses on the 2011–2019 period and primarily draws on twenty-two semi-structured elite interviews with diplomats, international officials and major non-governmental organization (NGO) staff working in Libya, which I conducted between January and March 2019 during fieldwork in Tunis—where most embassies and international organization representations to this country were then relocated—in a visit to Brussels and by phone. I basically asked these practitioners¹ *what* their governments or organizations were doing in and with Libya (ns), *how*, *why*, and *so what* (activities, timeline, interlocutors and partners, procedures, justifications, challenges, and effects). My coding of the interview notes and transcripts focused on references to specific Libyan actors, patterns of international engagement and rationalizations thereof. I also triangulated factual information with primary sources and secondary literature on the Libyan conflict as well as a dataset of reported acts of engagement/recognition between

¹Predominantly but not exclusively Western, all fully anonymized here in accordance with the majority’s preference.

external and Libyan actors (2011–2018) which was compiled as part of the same research project.

Based on my findings, this article argues that, *in practice* and beyond formally determining legal status, the international (non)recognition of governments is endowed with a distinct generative power, as it produces its own creatures; geopolitically inevitable, as external actors involved in a country cannot ultimately avoid engaging with territorially grounded domestic political actors; not a black-and-white situation, as it involves a broad variety of micro practices guided by different, often contradictory logics; and likely to run into three dilemmas stemming from the tensions between international versus domestic recognition, legitimacy versus effectiveness, and coherence versus inclusivity in conflict mediation.

To this purpose, after revisiting doctrinal debates in international law and foreign policy which reveal the normative vacuum and normative competition that have long surrounded the international recognition of governments (Section "Between Normative Vacuum and Normative Competition: The International Recognition of Governments in Legal-Historical Perspective"), I submit that this phenomenon begs to be studied from the perspective of Hegelian recognition theory as well as an international practice approach. I propose a generalizable typology of government recognition micro practices—declaratory, diplomatic, informal engagement, intergovernmental cooperation, and support practices—providing examples from various recent controversies (Section "The International Recognition of Governments as a Set of Practices"). I then analyze the case-specific small print, guiding logics, and effects of each category of micro practices in post-2011 Libya (Section "International Government Recognition Micro Practices in Post-2011 Libya"). I finally delve into the three aforementioned international government recognition dilemmas, which may similarly apply to other cases: international versus domestic recognition, legitimacy versus effectiveness, and coherence versus inclusivity (Section "International Government Recognition Dilemmas and Pitfalls").

Between Normative Vacuum and Normative Competition: The International Recognition of Governments in Legal-Historical Perspective

In stark contrast to the ample academic attention paid to the international (non)recognition of states (see [Visoka, Doyle, and Newman 2020](#)) in the context of processes of state formation ([Fabry 2010](#); [Coggins 2016](#); see also [Green 2011](#)), secessionism ([Griffiths 2016](#); [Griffiths 2021](#)), and the politics of unrecognized, de facto or contested states ([Pegg 1998](#); [Geldenhuys 2009](#); [Caspersen and Stansfield 2011](#); [Caspersen 2012](#); [Ker-Lindsay 2012](#); [Berg and Ker-Lindsay 2019](#)), its equivalent concerning the representative organs that act on behalf of states in the international sphere, namely governments, is little known and less understood. This is in spite of scholarly concern with recognition in international law having arisen in the mid-eighteenth century in relation to the recognition of elective monarchs ([Crawford 2006](#), 12), showing the extent to which the two issues are interwoven as components of what Stephen D. [Krasner \(1999, 14–6\)](#) calls “international legal sovereignty.” While states enjoy the fullest degree of international legal personality, including rights, duties, powers, and immunities, they cannot exert any of these or act by themselves without the intervention of their governments as agents. Furthermore, having an effective authority or government has invariably featured among the essential requirements for an entity to be acknowledged as a state, e.g., as per the 1933 Montevideo Convention criteria ([Peterson 2020, 205–6](#)). On the other hand, recognizing statehood and governments are legally and politically distinct questions. Under normal conditions, the latter simply does not arise because the recognition of a state automatically—by default—involves recognizing its central ruling authority as its government. Absent such normality, there is often an inverse

relationship between the contestation of recognition at these two levels: government recognition controversies tend to arise precisely when state recognition is not at stake, in the sense that there is substantial domestic and international consensus on preserving territorial integrity against partition or secession.

From a legal perspective, a state's recognition of another state's government confers the latter key rights and privileges vis-à-vis the former, ranging from the capacity to maintain official diplomatic relations, conclude international treaties, and sue in state courts, to control over its state assets there. Even more consequentially in conflict contexts, such recognition determines the international legal position on the use of force inside the state in question. The lawfulness of foreign military intervention in civil wars is subject to invitation and "consent" from the country's (recognized) government (Hasar 2022). When it comes to its nature and effects on legal status, the letter of law poses a binary choice and a zero-sum situation in emphasizing that recognition is an "all-or-nothing proposition, not a matter of degree," and thus "where a new government is recognized, its predecessor is de-recognized" (Roth 2015, 142–3). According to such a view, "[a] government either exists (and fulfils the criteria for its legal status) or it does not. There is no 'halfway house'" (Talmon 1998, 29). These stiff premises contrast with what the literature defeatedly describes as a "perennially inconsistent" practice (Peterson 2020, 205; Krasne 1999, 15). In fact, no single prevailing norm or doctrine has ever taken hold to regulate the international recognition of governments or its withholding, while examples of ad hoc political use have always abounded in contexts of revolution (e.g., Bolshevik/Soviet Russia), coup d'état and civil war (e.g., the Spanish civil war and the China–Taiwan dispute), belligerent occupation (e.g., European governments-in-exile during World War II and the Cambodia/Kampuchea one in the 1980s), and decolonization (e.g., the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic [GPRA]) (Talmon 1998, 34–5, 15).

In the political norm competition surrounding these practices, the Cold War saw a general preference for the broader principle of non-intervention, associated to sovereign equality and reflective of the bipolar divergence over domestic political order and legitimacy issues. This made coups, revolutions, and civil wars be considered as normal processes and origins of valid governments as long as external interference was not overt (Roth 2015, 150–1). The proactive international recognition or derecognition of governments was thus regarded with suspicion as a form of foreign meddling in domestic crises. Effective control through internal processes was meant to be a rule of thumb as to which authority to prioritize when in doubt—putting aside the difficulties of operationalizing it. Absent a clear winning horse, international actors would fall into so-called premature recognition, which is disallowed as a breach of the non-intervention principle (Lauterpacht 1947/2013, 94–5). Many prominent states, including the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth members in the 1980s, took this restrained approach a step further in formally adopted the policy of "recognizing states, not governments," also known as abolitionism. In fact, though, the abolitionist doctrine has always been challenged by legal scholars as "diplomatic window-dressing"—"only abolishing (or playing down) formal public statements on the recognition of governments but not the concept of recognition of governments as such" (Talmon 1998, 7, 6).

On the other hand, the post-Cold War era witnessed an erosion of the norms of non-intervention, effective control, and abolitionism when these clashed with the liberal democratic domestic political legitimacy standards increasingly proclaimed by aspiring governmental entities as well as international recognizing actors. Governmental illegitimacy arose as a normative issue in international politics and international law (Roth 2000; see Gunitsky 2017, 198–230). Consequently, there were relatively more cases of recognition being either denied to governments possessing effective control or granted to others who lacked it. This applies with different nuances to the three main categories of unconstitutional changes of government from

which government recognition contests originate—leaving aside situations of secessionism, foreign military occupation, and annexation (Talmon 1998, 7–9, 95–108) to focus on domestically contained disputes that do not affect state borders and “Westphalian sovereignty” (Krasner 1999, 20): coups d’état, revolutions, and civil wars. These three types of processes are “intimately connected, overlapping and running into each other at a number of junctures” (Lawson 2019, 5), their common denominator being a “break in legal continuity between governments” which may lead to the coexistence of two or more self-proclaimed governments of the state in question (Peterson 2020, 207).

Regarding coups—undertaken “by the military or other elites within the state apparatus” (Powell and Thyne 2011, 252)—the 1990s and 2000s saw a swift rise of an international anti-coup norm prioritizing legitimacy over effectiveness criteria. Regional organizations such as the OAS and the African Union led the institutionalization of sanctions against coup plotters and post-coup governments. The UN General Assembly supported this new approach with decisions to maintain recognition of ousted democratically elected governments, refusing the credentials of the post-coup delegations or deferring its decision on representation (e.g., for Haiti in 1991, Cambodia in 1997, Sierra Leone in 1997, Honduras in 2009, Ivory Coast in 2010, Guinea-Bissau in 2012, and Myanmar in 2021) (Barber 2022, 15–6). Consistency in the enforcement of the anti-coup norm was always far from achieved, though, and has increasingly faltered since the past decade (Tansey 2017, 150, 153). By contrast, revolutionary changes of government—based on collective mobilization (Lawson 2019, 5)—have not been the subject of any similar international normative development regarding international recognition, prohibitive or otherwise.

Finally, civil wars lie on the other end of the effectiveness-legitimacy spectrum in the sense that, beyond fairly old-fashioned notions such as the nineteenth-century recognition of belligerency and the recognition of national liberation movements associated to decolonization, the only relevant norm applicable to contending governments as such remains the classical prohibition of premature recognition: “[A]s long as it exists in some form, the government in power when the rebellion began should continue to be regarded as the affected state’s international agent until a rebel-organized rival has gained effective control of all or most of the territory” (Peterson 2020, 210). Legitimacy concerns aside, this becomes problematic and in tension with practical needs on the ground when confronted with the emergence of “areas of limited statehood” (Risse 2015). The longstanding and widely accepted practical solution has been to deal with multiple *de facto* governments while restricting formal, legal recognition to the most effective one.

This leads to the question of what Talmon calls the multiple “meanings” and “variants” of the recognition of governments. Regarding the latter, the most significant distinction in recognition declarations is the one between *de jure* and *de facto* recognition. Essentially, in the usage since the early twentieth century, *de jure* recognition means that the government in question is accredited legal status as a sovereign authority—the depository of its state’s sovereignty. *De facto* recognition is supposed to signal the recognizing state’s general willingness to entertain relations with the recognized government, the opinion that the latter “is not (yet) a sovereign authority” and/or a simple acknowledgment of its existence and effective authority over people and territory (Talmon 1998, 67, 82–8; see also Sánchez Legido 2022).

The International Recognition of Governments as a Set of Practices

How can we then make sense of the (non)recognition of governments in IR? Talmon’s painstaking legal analysis already suggests that *de facto* recognition exceeds the domains of law and of formal declarations. Pushing this reasoning further, Roth (2015, 143) contends that international recognition combines a legal and a political dimension, as “[r]ecognition practices may fall far short of clear assertions of legal

status, communicating nuanced messages about degrees of political acceptance.” Building on these valuable insights from the legal scholarship while analytically centering the “political” side of the story, I argue, the international recognition of governments begs to be studied from the perspective of Hegelian recognition theory as well as an international practice approach.

Bringing recognition theory into IR (see [Greenhill 2008](#); [Lindemann and Ringmar 2012](#); [Agné et al. 2013](#); [Daase et al. 2015](#)) helps to reconceptualize international recognition in non-dualistic terms, overcoming a narrow focus on legal status and either/or and zero-sum views. In moving away from modern atomist views of individual-society relations, Hegelian philosophers foreground recognition as the fundamental mechanism inherent to the “dialogical character” ([Taylor 1994](#), 32) and “original intersubjectivity” of human life; the hinge that enables the “interpenetration of socialization and individuation” at all levels ([Honneth 1995](#), 29, 16). In its application to IR over the past two decades, this social theoretical approach has contributed to a broadening understanding of international recognition, redefined as a “social act” whereby “another actor [. . .] is constituted as a subject with a legitimate social standing” ([Wendt 2003](#), 511)—an idea that resonates with relational theories of IR which assume that “actors are and can only be ‘actors-in-relations”” ([Qin 2016](#), 36; see [Jackson and Nexon 1999](#)). A prolific theoretical and empirical research agenda has ensued shedding light on issues such as respect and disrespect in world politics ([Wolf 2011](#); [Duncombe 2019](#)), the causes of interstate war ([Lindemann 2010](#)), status and rising power revisionism ([Murray 2019](#)), misrecognition and the “labour of the negative” ([Epstein, Lindemann and Sending 2018](#)), conflict transformation and peacebuilding ([Allan and Keller 2006](#); [Aggestam and Björkdahl 2013](#); [Strömbom 2014](#)) as well as cosmopolitanism ([Brincat 2017](#)). For the purpose of my research, the key advance of this literature over the preexisting legal(istic) scholarship on international recognition lies in the acknowledgment that in world politics there exist multiple social-relational and non-dualistic forms of recognition that result from the actors’ aggregation of inter/transnational interactions and dealings, without necessarily ever crossing a specific threshold or benchmark, or obtaining a legal stamp ([Fernández-Molina 2019](#)). In the words of [Bartelson \(2013\)](#), we see coexistence and interaction between three concepts of recognition: legal, political, and moral.

In parallel, my theoretical recalibration of the international recognition of governments calls for “[c]onsidering recognition not as an act but as a process” ([Newman and Visoka 2018](#), 370), and one where the dealings at stake may be analytically broken down into a range of international practices, that is, “socially meaningful patterns of action which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world” ([Adler and Pouliot 2011](#), 6). Going micro is essential here for at least two reasons. First, government recognition micro practices are “integral to understanding how macropolitics gets enacted, embodied and embedded,” not least because they sometimes “precede or even shape macropolitical trends” ([Solomon and Steele 2017](#), 270). Second and more importantly, as suggested by the advocates of micropolitical perspectives in IR, this is an issue where much of the “mass” comprising the countless nuances and shadows of international recognition slips through conventional macropolitical analysis ([Solomon and Steele 2017](#), 280) of simply who recognizes or supports whom. Hence, our insight is radically expanded by adopting limited temporal and spatial parameters, relationalism, and analytical pragmatism ([Steele 2011](#), 22–6), and thus bringing grand-theoretical debates “‘down’ to the ground of world politics” ([Adler and Pouliot 2011](#), 7)—as pursued, most notably, by international practice scholars.

The premises of the theory of practice, according to its original proponent in the social sciences, [Bourdieu \(1977, 96\)](#), are to locate social research “within “real activity as such,” i.e., in the practical relation to the world” and to overcome the

either/or choice between objectivism and subjectivism. Brought into IR in the 2000s, this approach holds the promise of transcending traditional levels of analysis, interparadigmatic grand-theoretical barriers, and ingrained dichotomies such as ideas/matter, agency/structure, and continuity/change (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 10–7). Six core commitments guide international practice theory (Bueger and Gadinger (2015, 453): the world must be understood in performative terms, process takes precedence over stasis, knowledge is situated in practice, learning is essentially collective and interactive, practices are material doings involving physical bodies and objects, and social orders are plural and overlapping. Social order multiplicity also concerns the key role given to the logic of practicality, alongside—or even prior to—the logics of consequences (instrumental rational choice), appropriateness (norm compliance) (March and Olsen 1998), and arguing (communicative action) (Risse 2000). A combination of Bourdieusian “habitus” and “practical sense,” the logic of practicality relies on “inarticulate know-how that makes what is to be done self-evident or commonsensical” (Pouliot 2008, 257). On this last point, though, rather than a “comprehensive” or hardcore form of practice theory that asserts the “ontological priority” of the logic of practicality (Pouliot 2008), I adhere to a “complementary” view (Bourbeau 2017, 171): what my empirical findings underscore is the crossover and the mutual influences between all the four logics.

Adopting the social-relational, process-oriented, non-dualistic, and performative standpoint shared by recognition and practice theories, combined with the inductive insights from the post-2011 Libya case study, the next move is to “ontologize” and demarcate the scope conditions of the micropolitical formations (Solomon and Steele 2017, 280) that are international government recognition micro practices. I propose a generalizable typology based on the patterns identified within the apparent messiness of Libya’s international government recognition contests, which should help shed light more broadly on this legally and politically muddled area (see Table 1). The first category is *declaratory practices*, which may be defined as speech acts expressing—and thus performing—a formal acknowledgment of the legitimacy, (sovereign) authority, and/or legal status of an aspiring government. This is the type of practice the international recognition of governments has been traditionally identified with (Roth 2015, 146), namely official statements including the magic word “recognition” or a virtual synonym, plus a defining—sometimes “very creative”—formula to specify its meaning and desired legal (non)effects (Talmon 1998, 23). They can be both bilateral—e.g., the State Department’s press statement whereby the US “[recognized] Juan Guaidó as the new interim President of Venezuela” in January 2019 (United States Department of State 2019)—and multilateral—e.g., the EU member states’ joint declaration to “acknowledge and support” the same Guaidó (Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires Étrangères-France 2019). Declaratory practices may also be negative, that is, non-recognition statements such as the New Zealander foreign minister’s announcement that her country “[did] not recognize the legitimacy of the military-led government” following the coup in Myanmar in February 2021 (New Zealand Government 2021), and analogous exclusionary pronouncements from a number of Western states about the Taliban government of Afghanistan in August–September of the same year (Reuters 2021a, b, c).

Secondly, *diplomatic practices* are those contacts, communications or “encounters” (Solomon and Steele 2017, 276) involved in officially “representing a polity vis-à-vis a recognized other” (Sending et al. 2011, 528). Their nature is inherently relational, to the extent that social interactions are deemed to have ontological precedence over, and be constitutive of, the individual actors or political entities that maintain them (Sending et al. 2015, 7). From the perspective of recognition-granters, the establishment of institutionalized diplomatic relations (diplomatic recognition)—seeking to signal (dis)approval of a particular government and/or

to increase one's own international prestige—has been shown to be heavily determined by endogenous network influences, or a “friends of friends or transitivity effect” (Kinne 2014, 247–8). As far as recognition seekers are concerned, as demonstrated by Newman and Visoka (2018, 368) in relation to contested states, diplomatic practices “make a difference” in their agency and the microdynamics of recognition, even countering structural factors such as normative institutions and great power preferences. They generate what Adler-Nissen and Pouliot (2014) call “emergent power” (see also Bouris and Fernández-Molina 2018). Diplomatic practices frequently, though not necessarily, go hand in hand with the aforementioned declaratory recognition practices. They may similarly be bilateral—e.g., the reopening of a dozen Asian and Arab embassies in Kabul since late 2021 (Arab News 2021; Haidar 2022), and the Chinese foreign minister's visit to this country in March 2022 (Reuters 2022)—or multilateral—e.g., the invitation of Myanmar's military junta chief to an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) emergency meeting in Jakarta in April 2021 (Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia 2021)—as well as positive or negative. In this last case, they take the form of diplomatic sanctions such as the reduction or removal of bilateral diplomatic ties or the suspension of membership in regional organizations—e.g., Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and African Union's suspensions of Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso following the military coups of August 2020/May 2021, September 2021, and January 2022, respectively (Avoulete 2022; Deutsche Welle 2022).

Thirdly, *informal engagement practices* share much of the performative content of diplomatic practices, namely contacts and communications, while purposefully—formally—avoiding their political legitimation and sovereignty line-drawing implications. While legitimacy concerns the normative status of a given governing institution primarily in the eyes of the population governed, by sovereignty lines here I refer to the formal legal distinction between state and non-state actors in the country in question. In order to dodge such effects, when acknowledged, these informal practices are distinctly portrayed as “engagement without recognition” (Ker-Lindsay 2015; Berg and Ker-Lindsay 2019), as in the EU high representative's August 2021 statement on the Taliban government: “We have to get in touch with the authorities in Kabul, whatever they are. The Taliban have won the war, so we will have to talk with them. [. . .] It's not a matter of official recognition, it's a matter of dealing with [. . .]” (Associated Press 2021).

Fourthly, *intergovernmental cooperation practices* are two-way bilateral or multilateral sectoral policy deals or legally binding treaties involving coordination obligations and benefits for all the parties. These arguably constitute the end goal of the international recognition of governments, yet at the same time further build up such recognition by accumulation, in a process-based manner. France's suspension of joint operations with Mali's armed forces after the May 2021 coup and Russia's subsequent dispatch of hundreds of military advisors to the same country provide negative and positive examples, respectively, in the sphere of bilateral security cooperation (Agence France-Presse 2021; Agence France-Presse 2022).

Fifthly and finally, *support practices* are one-way assistance policies addressed to recipients in the (un)recognized government's state or wider society. They rely on (meta)practices such as project funding and direct capacity building, and have different recognition implications depending on their design, implementation and partners—e.g., New Zealand's announcement that its “aid programme to Myanmar should not include projects that are delivered with, or benefit, the military government” (New Zealand Government 2021).

Table 1. Typology of government recognition micro practices

	Performative content	Aims/outcomes	Subtypes	Examples from Libya 2011–2019	Other examples
Declaratory practices	Speech acts	Expressing/performing a formal acknowledgment of the legitimacy, (sovereign) authority, and/or legal status of an aspiring government	Bilateral/multilateral Positive/negative	Declarations of recognition of NTC (2011) References to HoR in UNSC resolution 2174 (2014) Rome declaration, UNSC resolution 2259 and Council of EU conclusions recognizing GNA (2015–2016) Libya Contact Group with NTC (2011)	Statements acknowledging Guaidó as Venezuela’s president (2019)
Diplomatic practices	Contacts and communications	Officially representing a polity vis-à-vis a recognized government	Bilateral/multilateral Positive/negative	Avoidance of official contacts with western (2014–2015) and eastern (2016+) parallel governments Informal engagement with Haftar/LAAF (2014) and other VNSAs UNSMIL’s mediation with “all Libyan political actors” (2017–)	Reopening of embassies and diplomatic visits to Afghanistan (2021–)
Informal engagement practices	Contacts and communications	Interacting with a (para)governmental entity while formally avoiding political legitimation and sovereignty line-drawing effects	Bilateral/multilateral	US–UK military support to GNA-aligned militias fighting IS (2016) Mandates extensions for EUNAVFOR (2021–2022) MED Operation Sophia and EUBAM (2016–)	Informal engagement with Afghanistan’s Taliban government (2021–)
Intergovernmental cooperation practices	Two-way sectoral policy deals or legally binding treaties	Pursuing policy coordination with a recognized government, with obligations and benefits for all the parties	Bilateral/multilateral Positive/negative	MoU Italy–GNA (2017) UNDP SFL (2016–2022) Capacity building for Libyan Coast Guard (2016–) Bilateral funding to international and Libyan NGOs	International military cooperation with Mali’s army (2021–2022)
Support practices	One-way assistance	Supporting recipients in the (un)recognized government’s state or society	Bilateral/multilateral		Humanitarian and development aid to Myanmar (2021–)

International Government Recognition Micro Practices in Post-2011 Libya

This section demonstrates the usefulness of my typology of international government recognition micro practices while discussing what the post-2011 Libya case study tells us on the specific guiding logics and effects of each category.

Declaratory Practices

The best example of the generative power of declaratory practices of government recognition in post-2011 Libya concerns the NTC, which was established in Benghazi within days of the anti-Gaddafi uprising in February 2011 as a tool of rebel diplomacy—as a political interface oriented towards the international community (Coggins 2015; Huang 2016)—and ended up governing and representing the country abroad for nearly ten months following the end of the first civil war (October 2011–August 2012). An assorted mix of activists, local notables, diaspora leaders, and defecting Gaddafi regime elites, including high-level diplomats, the NTC initially “did not see themselves as a government, for to claim so was tantamount to equivalence with the unelected [Gaddafi] whom they sought to remove” (Bartu 2015, 38). Besides meeting basic governance needs in areas under rebel control in the east of the country, the two limited, interrelated goals the NTC set for itself were to secure international support for the revolution and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention—especially from a reluctant and divided US administration (Jones and Mattiacci 2019, 746–7)—as well as to finance the rebels’ war effort by gaining access to Libya’s sovereign assets abroad (Bartu 2015, 32).

To a great extent, the NTC constituted itself as an actor and changed its identity to acquire *governmenthood* thanks to its accumulation of international recognition while still lacking effective control of the country’s territory—what international lawyers would call premature recognition. This was initially provided through declaratory practices. The carefully drafted recognition statements in question were of three different types, ranging along a continuum in terms of legal effects (Talmon 2011). The least forceful were declarations that recognized the NTC as “a”—and later “the”—“legitimate political interlocutor,” that is, a key partner for negotiations concerning Libya. Such language provided political legitimization which nonetheless lacked any legal value or association with the establishment of formal diplomatic relations. Its vagueness facilitated the resort to this practice by a number of officially abolitionist Western states such as United States and Australia during the uncertain first half of the 2011 civil war (May–June 2011).

The second group of declarations, pioneered by France and Qatar as early as in March (Bartu 2015, 41), recognized the NTC as “the legitimate representative of the Libyan people” with a wording that recalled the status ascribed to anticolonial national liberation movements back in the 1960–1970s (Freudenschuss 1982). This not only sanctioned the group’s legitimacy in the sense of international acceptance and capability to represent its people, but it also enabled its material empowerment through foreign funding. Yet, the formula still fell short of impairing the international legal status of the incumbent Gaddafi government. Such was the intermediate option chosen by the United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada in early to mid-June, and a little later by Turkey. A diplomat from one of these states would describe such “quite early” recognition absent territorial control as “an unusual decision [. . .] and more of a political bet,” driven by their country’s prominent role in the international military intervention and also facilitated by the “credibility” of Mahmoud Jibril as the chief executive of the NTC (interview 2). “Libya had the most credible opposition of any Arab Spring country,” wrote British Prime Minister David Cameron in his memoir years later (Cameron 2019).

Finally, the declarations with legal status and sovereignty line-drawing effects that granted the NTC legal capacity to represent the Libyan state to the exclusion of

the Gaddafi government were those that recognized it as “holding governmental authority” (Talmon 2011). Italy, France, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were the first to explicitly take this step in early June, with the United States and most Western states following suit in mid-to-late July (Bartu 2015, 45–6, 48). In the end, in spite of the widespread prudence and nuances in declaratory recognition practices, the fact is that in mid-September an overwhelming majority of members of the UN General Assembly voted in favor (114 for and 17 against) of accepting the NTC delegation’s credentials to seat as Libya’s representative (United Nations 2011). The snowball effect confirms that “diplomatic signaling is a heavily interdependent phenomenon, with states taking cues from one another in determining whether and when to extend or retract recognition” (Kinne 2014, 256). The international recognition of the NTC as a government was thus consummated (Mundy 2018, 63), with declaratory practices contributing to its identity formation and change, political legitimation, material empowerment, and sovereignty line-drawing.

Diplomatic and Informal Engagement Practices

When it comes to international contacts and communications, their key role and increasing institutionalization during the early process of cumulative recognition of the NTC was evident in the dispatch of special envoys to Benghazi (Talmon 2011), or the establishment of the so-called Libya Contact Group as a multilateral framework for the Arab League, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the EU and NATO to regularly meet such rebel government (Bartu 2015, 40; Mundy 2018, 79). These practices acquired formal diplomatic status and refocused on the capital, Tripoli, when Libya entered a new stage of stabilization, political transition, and state-building in the aftermath of the 2011 civil war (October 2011–May 2014) (see Constantini 2018). International actors would deepen their bilateral diplomatic engagement with the NTC and the government that succeeded it in November 2012, appointed by the democratically elected GNC, with significant political legitimation effects. Their eagerness was driven by a combination of the logics of appropriateness—a perception of responsibility due to prior involvement in the 2011 military intervention (interview 20)—, consequences—self-interest in Libya’s security and stability, migration control, and energy sector—and practicality—their fresh presence in Tripoli and access to a wide range of Libyan interlocutors (interview 19).

However, new recognition issues would stand in the way of these emerging diplomatic practices in 2014. Disputes over the extension of the GNC’s mandate and the validity of the results of the legislative elections held in June led to a split in Libya’s legislative authority between the newly elected HoR, relocated to the eastern city of Tobruk, and the GNC, which continued operating from Tripoli. Each parliament stuck with its corresponding appointed government, while the multiple VNSA still present in the country were remobilized and coalesced on the side of either the GNC (Libyan Dawn) or the HoR (Operation Dignity, led by the military strongman Khalifa Haftar and what the HoR then designated as the “Libyan National Army”), unleashing a second civil war (May 2014–December 2015). At this point, the broad consensus in the UN and the international community was on recognizing the democratic legitimacy and official standing of the HoR (interview 3; Anderson 2017, 243; Mundy 2018, 163). References to this parliamentary body in Security Council resolution 2174 had both political legitimation and sovereignty line-drawing effects (United Nations Security Council 2014). The latter materialized in official contacts with Tripoli’s self-proclaimed National Salvation Government being treated as a red line and actively avoided.

This situation illustrates how, in international government recognition controversies, diplomatic recognition practices usually coexist with and are complemented by other diplomatic practices that actively signal non-recognition of excluded

actors—which I call recognition avoidance practices—as well as informal engagement practices lying somewhere in between these two options. Interestingly, here, recognition avoidance was notably facilitated by the evacuation and relocation to Tunis of almost all diplomatic representations to Libya from the summer of 2014, due to the deterioration of the security situation inside the country. The logics of appropriateness and practicality intersected. According to some foreign diplomats, the protracted physical distancing and security impediments made it virtually “impossible to take any practical steps for pursuing cooperation with the country” for almost two years (interview 15). In addition, the most adamant abolitionist states pursued recognition avoidance practices such as not appointing or replacing ambassadors—as designating a new one would require their accreditation by, and therefore recognition of, one of the two Libyan parallel governments—and meeting any Libyan officials only in informal settings (interviews 10 and 15). The most significant exception to the international consensus during this stage was the policy of Turkey, which remained loyal to the GNC, maintained a diplomatic presence on the ground through its consulate in Misrata and had a special envoy publicly visiting the Tripoli (para)governmental headquarters in October 2014 (Laessing 2020, 99–100). Also, Russia opted for some indirect, business-focused engagement with Tripoli, e.g., with officially sanctioned Russian business delegations traveling to this capital to discuss future economic cooperation prospects (interview 15).

The red lines concerning government recognition would shift again from late 2015, when the GNA was established in Tripoli under the terms of the UN-led Libyan Political Agreement. This led to a new strong international consensus on politically legitimizing the GNA as well as drawing a sovereignty line by diplomatically dealing with it in an exclusive manner and actively avoiding the eastern Bayda-based parallel government—though with plenty of nuances and inconsistencies around other political actors and VNSA associated to the latter such as Haftar and his “Libyan National Army”/Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) military alliance (interviews 1, 2, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 19, and 20). The logic of appropriateness behind the “taboo” against working with the eastern government (interview 22) was reinforced by the logic of consequences and effectiveness-related considerations, as contrary to the HoR, Haftar and the LAAF, this government was increasingly seen as existing “only on paper” (interview 15) and “not in power of anything” (interview 21).

The first and foremost diplomatic recognition avoidance practice was to not reply to letters or emails from this parallel government, as agreed for example in a common decision by EU member state embassies (interview 11). Secondly, foreign representatives refrained from meeting or attending any event (e.g., opening ceremonies) with the presence of its representatives, and especially dodged being photographed with them. Thirdly, cooperation with municipalities would become gradually prioritized by the international community partly as a workaround to escape government recognition issues (Megerisi 2018; see below). Fourthly, several foreign countries emphasized the line between official diplomatic interaction and informal engagement practices that they understood as “engagement without recognition” (Ker-Lindsay 2015). The latter were particularly convenient for on-the-ground communication with political actors and VNSA, which required a careful “choice of who we send,” or the status of the embassy staff involved, “in order to avoid conferring legitimacy to the wrong people.” For example, a junior diplomat said she could “meet Libyan actors across the country” with “nobody [. . .] interested in taking and posting pictures online as it would happen in the case of the ambassador” (interview 3).

In sum, international diplomatic and informal engagement practices during Libya’s second civil war and following the establishment of the GNA sought to make a difference in terms of political (de)legitimation and sovereignty line-drawing for the contending (para)governmental entities. However, the boundaries between

informal and formal engagement were often porous, as demonstrated by Haftar's progression—at different speeds depending on the international actor—from the former to the latter (see below). The sovereignty line separating state and non-state actors was thus increasingly blurred.

Intergovernmental Cooperation and Support Practices

Enabling two-way intergovernmental policy cooperation practices in Libya, both bilaterally and multilaterally, is the aim that transpires in the story of the accelerated negotiation, international recognition and establishment of the GNA in 2015–2016. Such rush has been widely attributed to the Western states' need for a "regular" Libyan partner with whom cooperation could be immediately—and legally—boosted in the fields of anti-terrorism and migration control. The United States and United Kingdom urgency primarily stemmed from the push to launch a decisive military operation to uproot the Islamic State (IS) group from the Libyan region of Sirte (Wehrey 2018, 239–42), yet only in response to a call for international support from a legitimate Libyan government. This concurred with the EU's (interview 20) and particularly neighboring Italy's pressing interest in having a suitable governmental counterpart ready to cooperate in curbing northbound irregular migration flows from the Libyan coast. Both of these short-term goals were largely achieved in 2016–2017, with the deployment of US–UK special forces, intelligence, training, arms shipments, and airstrikes in support of the GNA-aligned Misratan militias fighting IS (interview 3; United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2016), an extension of the mandates of the EU Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED) Operation Sophia and EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya (EUBAM), as well as the conclusion of a migration-focused memorandum of understanding between Italy and the GNA (International Crisis Group 2016, 1, 6, 23; Asseburg et al. 2018, 23, 26; Mundy 2018, 179–97; Human Rights Watch 2019, 22).

Paradoxically though, despite the causal role played by these external needs and the logic of consequences in the very creation–recognition of the GNA, two-way intergovernmental cooperation practices as such were nearly absent from the accounts of international engagement in/with Libya I gathered in my interviews 3 years later. Instead, the bulk of ongoing activity in early 2019 was described as "support," that is, one-way assistance practices addressed to a wide range of Libyan state and non-state beneficiaries. Most of these involved a move towards a more decentralized, non-governmental and inclusive approach, which was overtly related to growing skepticism about the strength, centrality, capacity and durability of the GNA as well as its problematic performance in migration cooperation in particular. International support covered a broad range of policy areas, including humanitarian and development assistance; post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction; political transition, state-building, and (democratic) governance; and security support. Yet, in terms of specific means, all this activity boiled down to three main types of (meta)practices: bilateral funding, multilateral funding, and direct capacity building (e.g., training).

External funding in general was subject to changes in both the donors' priorities—e.g., from governance to migration in the case of the EU—and Libya's fluid domestic political context, which discouraged long-term planning (interview 19). The latter constraints, chief among which were government recognition dilemmas (interview 14), explained a general leaning towards multilateral channels, though this funding could still be earmarked to keep projects in line with each specific donor's preferences (interview 16): "The circumstances pressed everybody to work more on the multilateral UN approach rather than directly, because you were in the midst of a political polarization where any statement you made would have had a consequence, [. . .] and there was a massive vacuum in the institutional and government presence in general" (interview 4).

The major multi-donor instrument since April 2016 was the UN Development Programme's (UNDP) Stabilization Facility for Libya (SFL) (interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 10, 12, 14, 18, and 20). A German initiative inspired by the model of the UNDP's Funding Facility for Stabilization in Iraq and sponsored by thirteen mostly Western foreign donors, the SFL's original aim was to support the GNA, building its domestic legitimacy through the rehabilitation of damaged public infrastructure and the provision of basic services throughout the country. The GNA furthermore co-chaired its governing Project Board, so the SFL's design and functioning had important political legitimization and sovereignty line-drawing implications. These, however, started to be reconsidered and diluted following an independent review conducted in 2018 ([United Nations Development Programme 2019](#)). The SFL's political objective then shifted to increasing the legitimacy of Libya's national institutions, broadly understood, with a more inclusive approach and more attention to the geographical balance between the west, east and south of the country (interviews 10, 4, 6, and 18). The consequence of such change in support practices was increased decentralization and prioritization of partnerships with Libyan municipalities, which would become the distinctive feature of the SFL thereafter (interviews 1, 3, 4, 6, and 18). This may be seen as a government recognition avoidance practice with political de-legitimation and sovereignty line-blurring effects: "Local engagement [was] now prioritized in response to the GNA's shortcomings. This entails the risk of contributing to city-state dynamics and to further fragmentation of the state in Libya" (interview 22). A similar pattern and trajectory drifting away from the exclusive focus on the GNA could be observed in other multilateral funding practices for projects implemented by UNDP and various UN humanitarian agencies.

For their part, bilateral funding practices were generally less consequential in terms of government recognition because donors showed a constant preference for channeling small grants to international and Libyan NGOs, even for governance-related projects in which Libyan state institutions were the ultimate target (e.g., transitional justice, rule of law, justice sector reform) (interviews 2, 4, and 10). Funding international NGOs also constituted a more indirect form of involvement—and arguably a way to evade responsibility—in controversial areas such as mediation or dialogue with Libyan VNSA (interviews 13 and 1) and humanitarian assistance in migrant detention centers (interviews 9 and 19). When Libyan state institutions were inevitably concerned, the pattern was to de-governmentalize the aid as much as possible, with the ensuing sovereignty line-blurring effect. For instance, since 2014 US electoral assistance prioritized capacity building for the country's two electoral commissions over working together with specific governments such as the GNA (interviews 12 and 8). Also, the EU's own (UNDP-implemented) stabilization project launched in 2017, Strengthening Local Capacities for Resilience and Recovery, largely copied the approach and practices of the SFL, including a strong focus on municipalities—though it was funded by the new EU Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF) for Africa and therefore tied to migration control objectives (interviews 20 and 6).

By contrast, direct capacity building for Libyan institutions could hardly escape engagement with the incumbent, internationally recognized government, namely the GNA in 2015–2021. These support practices mostly took the form of training by their European counterparts of Libyan security forces such as judiciary police and prison officers, military engineers, the civil protection corps and the forensic police (interviews 4, 16, and 21). Over time, as anxiety about migration dominated European agendas, the Libyan Coast Guard would stand out as the top recipient of foreign training by far, primarily in the framework of the EU's Seahorse maritime surveillance programme and EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia (interviews 11, 20, and 21; see also [Fernández-Molina and Casani 2023](#)). Altogether, the support practices prioritized by the international community in Libya since 2016 had mixed and inconsistent effects of legitimization and de-legitimation, as well as sovereignty

line-drawing and line-blurring, with regard to the country's (para)governmental actors.

International Government Recognition Dilemmas and Pitfalls

Building on my typology and analysis of the driving logics and specific effects of different international government recognition micro practices, this section elaborates on the three main policy dilemmas that emerged from my interviews about the Libyan conflict—international versus domestic recognition, legitimacy versus effectiveness, and coherence versus inclusivity. Besides the discussion of case-specific empirical findings, it aims to sketch some broad lines for the middle-range theorization of the international recognition of governments.

International versus Domestic Recognition

The first dichotomy and tension that may affect the creatures of the international recognition of governments lies in the lack of correspondence between international and internal recognition. Where the former precedes the latter, there is a risk of domestic-level misrecognition between an externally backed government and (parts of) the country's society. This mismatch goes far beyond the situations referred to by the legal notion of premature recognition, which focuses on an aspiring government's effective territorial control, or the lack thereof, as the decisive criterion. Building on recognition theory, I argue, domestic recognition takes place through the social contract, understood as “the entirety of explicit or implicit agreements between all relevant societal groups and the sovereign (the government or any other actor in power), defining their rights and obligations towards each other” (Loewe et al. 2021, 3). In exchange for its society's recognition of legitimacy—which translates into paying taxes and other contributions—the state, and the government on its behalf, is expected to collectively and individually provide a form of what Honneth's (1995, 92–130) calls “love” or care (protection and public security), “esteem” (recognition of difference), and “respect” (equal rights), including economic redistribution and welfare (see Fraser and Honneth 2003 on the recognition–redistribution debate).

The successive internationally recognized governments in post-2011 Libya have generally fallen short of meeting these conditions, and hence of gaining sufficient domestic recognition. Attempts to build cohesive central authority in a pervasively fragmented country have been repeatedly spoiled by its local “politically relevant elite” and VNSA (Lacher 2016; Lacher 2020). Under these circumstances, as Furness and Trautner (2020, 10) contend, the externally sponsored “elite deals that masquerade as political settlements are inherently unstable, and are widely regarded to be illegitimate due to their lack of inclusion and the failure, if not the active denial, of the central state to deliver basic services.”

The NTC's twofold struggle for international and domestic recognition back in 2011 provides a good illustration of the tensions between these two dynamics. From the outset, the NTC had to reconcile its rebel diplomacy role with internal efforts to govern areas under its control and gain the backing of all the Libyan regions and societal groups, as shown by the transformation of its externally oriented Crisis Management Committee into a domestically implementing Executive Committee. Such an inward turn involved being more responsive to popular, local council, tribal and especially VNSA demands, including requests that its chief executive Jibril “spend less time outside the country” (Bartu 2015, 50, 37–8, 40–3; Joffé 2016, 297; Mundy 2018, 63–4, 73–4, 86–94; Melcangi and Mezran 2022, 8). Regardless, this did not pose a major concern to the NTC's recognizing states given the exceptionality of the revolutionary and foreign military intervention moment. And the NTC eventually managed to enter a virtuous circle by achieving the release of Libya's frozen

assets abroad, which allowed it to continue to pay salaries—the political-economic joint connecting (premature) international and domestic recognition.

Four and a half years later, at the time of the establishment of the GNA in late 2015, the gap between international and domestic government recognition was considerably larger. Driven by Western anti-terrorism and migration cooperation urgency, the most perplexing aspect of the GNA's international recognition—which made it even more premature than that of the NTC—was that it predated its very establishment. International recognition was “guaranteed” (interview 13) in a ministerial meeting in Rome on December 13, that is, 4 days *before* the actual signature by Libyan actors of the Libyan Political Agreement in Skhirat, Morocco, which led to the GNA's formation ([United Nations Support Mission in Libya 2015](#)). A joint communiqué by the UN and the UN Security Council's five permanent members, the EU, the Arab League, the African Union, key member states of these regional organizations as well as Turkey stated: “We [. . .] pledge our support for a Government of National Accord [GNA] as the sole legitimate government of Libya. We will cease official contacts with individuals claiming to be part of institutions which are not validated by the Libya[n] Political Agreement” ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Turkey 2015](#)). This recognition declaration would be strongly endorsed by the Security Council resolution 2259, which called upon UN members to “cease support to and official contact with parallel institutions” ([United Nations Security Council 2015](#)), as well as by the Council of the EU ([Council of the European Union 2016](#); interview 21).

By contrast, the GNA's domestic recognition was never fulfilled. Despite its involvement in the power-sharing deal and its sanctioning by the Libyan Political Agreement as the country's only (transitional) legislative authority, the Tobruk-based HoR—along with its allied eastern actors led by Haftar—soon denied consent to the GNA and to nominations to the associated Presidential Council (with head-of-state functions). This would result in yet another government split, this time between the GNA and the eastern Bayda-based parallel government: “The formation of the GNA was accompanied by strong international support, but it also created a new east vs. west recognition issue” (interview 22). Moreover, an additional proof of the GNA's weak domestic recognition was its limited effective rule, at the time of its establishment in Tripoli, over the capital itself and the VNSA that controlled its (in)security. The Presidential Council did not actually set foot there until late March 2016, when its members arrived on a navy frigate from Tunisia at the Abu Sitta naval base, relying only on promises of support from a few local armed groups ([Lacher and al-Idrissi 2018](#), 3). They would furthermore continue to operate from the naval base avoiding the city's risks for several months ([International Crisis Group 2016](#), 10–2; interview 10).

Altogether, in hindsight, most external actors seemed uncomfortable with the GNA's international versus domestic recognition gap. The GNA appeared to have been “to a great extent the product of international recognition and support” (interview 3), one of those “fictions the international community has to get into” (interview 13). A common assessment at the time of my interviews was that “the only thing that [sustained] it [was] the international legitimacy” (interview 4). Aware of this potential pitfall, some Western self-declared abolitionist states had from the outset avoided formally recognizing the GNA as Libya's only government, despite—somewhat contradictorily—“recognizing” the UN Security Council resolutions on this matter (interview 10). Similarly, Russia argued that it had “recognized” the Libyan Political Agreement by voting in favor of resolution 2259, but did not consider the GNA as a “fully legitimate” actor because of its lack of HoR approval (interview 15). To some extent, the aim to have it both ways in engaging the GNA was also present early on in the EU's diplomatic, intergovernmental cooperation, and support practices. In that case, a new format of bilateral political dialogue was “invented specifically for Libya” in the spring of 2016, namely the EU–Libya

inter-ministerial meetings, in an attempt to work with the GNA albeit “at a more technical level” (interview 20).

Legitimacy versus Effectiveness

A second predicament classically involved in the international recognition of governments, as discussed in the legal-historical overview above, concerns the prioritization of legitimacy or effectiveness criteria. The relationship between these becomes particularly complex in conflict contexts that breed “areas of limited statehood” (Risse 2015) where the supposed central government is ineffective. The best example of practical responses and workarounds to such a problem can be found in the dichotomy between engagement with the GNA and Haftar from 2016 to 2021. Despite a strong international consensus that enshrined the GNA as the sole legitimate Libyan government, its rival Haftar and his LAAF maintained and expanded control over a large part of the country—not only in the east but also increasingly in the south—which encouraged contacts and dealings with him based on the logic of consequences, exacerbating the dilemma (interview 22). International practices moved from informal engagement “at a dialogue level” (interview 1) to more and more official diplomatic formats. This was justified in my interviews, first and foremost, by a range of effectiveness-related arguments: “Haftar is an important factor that cannot be ignored” (interview 15). “General Haftar is a party on the ground, so for political reasons you talk to them” (interview 19). “Besides the Skhirat-recognized actors, we talk to all the people who have influence on the peace process. [. . .] We talk to Haftar as one of the stakeholders, of the military commanders in charge of parts of Libya” (interview 21). On this point, furthermore, the logic of consequences often converged with that of practicality: “The biggest inconsistency is between the policy design level and what implementers do on the ground” (interview 22).

Secondly, the logic of appropriateness was invoked when drawing a very particular (sovereignty) line between contacts with Haftar and with the eastern parallel government. The international consensus on avoiding the latter was repeatedly emphasized, suggesting by contrast that engagement with non-governmental actors was less problematic: “It is very different. [. . .] It is okay to talk to General Haftar [. . .] but it is less so to speak with an illegitimate government, because the second one would use our meeting to claim international recognition. We do not want to violate the UN positions on this” (interview 19). This was connected to various considerations about the particular nature and sources of Haftar’s domestic political legitimacy: “He has become an actor for two reasons, national and international. [. . .] Support and territory is something that militias have as well. What makes him a non-militia is that, contrary to what happened in the west, where armed groups were integrated within the Ministry of the Interior or the Ministry of Defense, Haftar decided to not fall under a [civilian] government, he decided to be parallel to a government. And by being claimed or called back to lead the army, and therefore given the legitimacy for that, he distinguished himself from the government and the parliament [. . .]” (interview 4). “I never said that Haftar is legitimate. [. . .] But differently from other actors that have presence on the ground, Haftar does not claim to be the legitimate government. He claims to be a party on the ground, so a part of the Libyan crisis, but he does not have any claim to be a government” (interview 19).

Thirdly, my interviewees conveyed a widespread sense that, by early 2019, Haftar’s international recognition was already a *fait accompli*. He had moved from getting visits in Benghazi from just regional allies such as Egypt and the UAE to being officially received in Moscow twice in 2016 (interview 15; Reuters 2016), to playing a prominent role in the Libya-focused multilateral summitry led by France and Italy in the following two years. As these two European states were “trying to out-conference

each other” (interview 3), Haftar was invited to two summits in Paris in July 2017 and May 2018, where he was put on the same footing with the GNA and Presidential Council head Fayez al-Sarraj: “There is political legitimacy in the hands of Mr Sarraj. There is military legitimacy in the hands of Mr Haftar,” said French President Emmanuel Macron ([Middle East Monitor 2017](#)). As for the Italians, they invited Haftar among other key Libyan representatives to the Palermo conference in November 2018, where last-minute theatrics suggesting he might cancel attendance ended up raising his profile ([Al Jazeera 2018](#)). According to diplomats from other countries, he was “treated almost as a head of state” and allowed to have “his conference within the conference,” which had the effect of further “empowering” and “emboldening” him (interviews 3 and 2). “He likes to claim that people are struggling to have him, because this gives him more importance vis-à-vis his own constituency [. . .]. The reality of the matter is that he would have died to come to Rome or to Paris, or anywhere that gives him a degree of international recognition” (interview 19).

In the end, the outcome of this whole process was to turn Haftar into a “now unavoidable actor” (interview 13)—a self-fulfilling prophecy consolidating, so to speak, a diplomatic fact on the ground, at least until the 2019–2020 war: “You cannot ignore someone like Haftar who has attained such a level of influence. This is a difficult balance and a challenge for the international community” (interview 3). 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. In this case, rather than considering effectiveness and legitimacy in dichotomic terms, the informal engagement and diplomatic practices of international actors had created a mutually reinforcing relationship between (perceptions of) effectiveness and international and domestic political legitimacy of rival VNSA, to the detriment of the exclusiveness of—and consistency on—the international recognition of the GNA.

Coherence versus Inclusivity

The legitimacy versus effectiveness quandary intersects with the also widespread problem of inclusion/exclusion and recognition of key VNSA in conflict mediation and peace processes, where “talking and negotiating usually imply gradual steps of recognizing the counterpart,” which raises “concerns of (in)directly recognizing or legitimating armed groups through engagement” ([Geis et al. 2021](#), 4). My interviewees pointed towards this concern when discussing what some of them saw as the “confusion between recognition and negotiations”: “Now, in diplomacy, there is this blurred line between negotiating with someone and recognizing that someone” (interview 13). At the same time, two broad lessons about effective UN mediation in the latest generation of complex, internationalized civil wars are that “power-sharing agreements should be sufficiently inclusive; the negotiations should bring together actors who are truly representative of the political forces and constituencies on the ground,” and consequently, “UN mediators should avoid taking sides in favor of unity governments if those governments themselves become parties to the conflict and undermine agreements” ([Asseburg et al. 2018](#), 6). Put differently, a final dilemma emerges between coherence and consistency around international government recognition stances, on the one hand, and inclusivity in conflict mediation (the logic of arguing), on the other.

In this respect, one further justification for engaging Haftar was that his very recognition-seeking behavior could be turned into leverage for his foreign interlocutors and ultimately put at the service of the UN-led negotiation process (interview 21): “They are all starving for international recognition, and this is our strongest lever to nudge them towards a political agreement” (interview 19). More generally, the coherence versus inclusivity question had first emerged in post-2011 Libya in relation to the new mediation role taken on by the UN Support Mission in

Libya (UNSMIL) in the context of the 2014–2015 power split and civil war, where a choice had to be made between recognition of the HoR and “mediation involving those who had de facto control” (interview 22). The problem reappeared following the establishment of the GNA in late 2015. States that refrained from formally recognizing this government would later claim that they did this “because of concerns about inclusivity at a time when the UN process was fairly partial and one-sided, because we found [. . .] that this put us a bit into a position of more neutrality, like in the humanitarian tradition” (interview 10).

Over time, UNSMIL itself would come to realize that its coherence on the GNA’s exclusive recognition was getting in the way of the inclusivity and effectiveness of its mediation efforts. As a result, from mid-2017 onwards, UNSMIL’s mandate was reframed as involving engaging with “all Libyan political actors” and “all players on the ground” in order to “bridge the inter-Libyan divide”—notwithstanding the fact that the GNA remained its primary official interlocutor for the transitional period: “Our job is to create one unified, democratically elected and effective authority, not a third authority” (interview 5). UNSMIL’s estrangement from the GNA was in the first place a reflection of fresh ideas from the then newly appointed Special Representative of the Secretary-General Ghassan Salamé, who drawing on his academic background, prioritized “more sophisticated mediation approaches” and “bottom-up initiatives” involving non-state actors (interview 13). His roadmap foresaw organizing a Libyan national conference in 2019 where formal endorsement would be given to a pre-negotiated, consensual transition plan—including the divisive issue of the sequence of constitution referendum, parliamentary and presidential elections—and obtaining prior agreement and commitment from all actors in order to “avoid repeating the mistakes” of the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement (interview 5; [Asseburg et al. 2018](#), 25–6).

Secondly, the broad-based preparatory consultation process required by Salamé’s national conference plan granted a central role to grassroots dialogue initiatives (e.g., town hall meetings, dialogue between VNSA and between municipalities) run by international mediation NGOs with a distinct emphasis on inclusivity, such as the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and Peaceful Change Initiative (interviews 1, 10, and 13). Thirdly, this coincided with the 2018 review and change of approach of the UNDP’s SFL (interviews 10 and 16), also in the same direction of seeking decentralization and greater inclusivity in international support practices (see above). Fourthly and more broadly, all of these reconsiderations responded to the conflict’s shifting context: “The international community has woken up. [. . .] The evolution of the context has proven that the follow-up of the Libyan Political Agreement was built on a castle of cards” (interview 10). Other major international actors such as the United States would follow UNSMIL’s lead in “reassessing and scaling down” support for the GNA to instead pursue a more inclusive approach (interview 12).

Conclusion

The overall picture of the international recognition of governments looks like a disorganized version of [Krasner’s \(1999\)](#) “organized hypocrisy.” Not only are the logics of appropriateness and consequences “decoupled” ([Agné et al. 2013](#), 175); but the norms and principles guiding the former are themselves shaky and contested. Based on the case study of post-2011 Libya, this article has shown that, in its political dimension beyond legal status issues, the international (non)recognition of governments is a composite macro practice with four main characteristics. First, it is endowed with a distinct generative power, as the declaratory, diplomatic, informal engagement, intergovernmental cooperation, and support micro practices it consists of have mutually reinforcing and cumulative effects of identity formation and change, material empowerment, political legitimation, and sovereignty line-drawing in aspiring governments and alike actors. The role of recognition in shaping

identity (Greenhill 2008) is consistent with both the Hegelian relational ontology that underpins recognition theory and the scholarship that highlights the constitutive effects of specific international practices. In addition, many of the aspiring governments' resources are similarly "inhering in the relations that they have with others" (Sending et al. 2015, 12; see Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014). As a result, the quest for recognition "is often quite strategic and reputation is a resource in the struggle for power" (Lindemann and Ringmar 2012, 221). There is also a parallel effect of political legitimation of the (para)governmental entities in the eyes of third actors or audiences—domestic as well as foreign—in both normative and empirical (effectiveness-based) terms (Kinne 2014, 249; Geis et al. 2021, 9–10). And finally, international recognition plays a crucial role in (re)drawing sovereignty lines with regard to the distinction between state and non-state actors. The Libyan political actors constituted, empowered, and legitimated by international recognition include not only aspiring central governments such as the NTC in 2011–2012 and the GNA in 2015–2021 but also, paradoxically, non-governmental challengers such as Haftar, whose weight grew thanks to foreign inconsistencies regarding the legitimacy versus effectiveness dilemma. On the other hand, the non-recognition of the parallel governments of Tripoli in 2014–2015 and Bayda since late 2015 decisively contributed to shrinking their actorness at all levels.

Secondly, the international recognition of governments is geopolitically inevitable, as beyond declaratory practices, external actors involved in a given country cannot escape the need to choose with which territorially based domestic political actors to engage at each point in time, and with which degree of closeness, directness, and formality. Only purely extraterritorial governments-in-exile may be an exception to this rule. This supports Talmon's (1998, 5–7) argument that the abolitionist doctrine of "recognizing states, not governments" does not work in reality beyond words—beyond reducing the significance of formal recognition statements. From a practice and recognition theory perspective which views international recognition as a product of cumulative social interactions, as a matter of fact and irrespective of intent, "engagement without recognition" (Ker-Lindsay 2015) is never absolutely possible. The snowballing and upgrade of initially informal international contacts with Haftar to more and more official diplomatic practices, with widely acknowledged recognitional effects, provides a compelling example. Thirdly, the international recognition of governments is not a black-and-white situation because of the divergent and at times contradictory logics that guides the various micro practices at play. For example, the logic of appropriateness (international consensus and legitimacy) behind the exclusive recognition of the GNA increasingly clashed with the logics of consequences (effectiveness) and arguing (inclusivity in mediation and negotiations).

Finally, the international recognition of governments is likely to run into three dilemmas which are also prominent in other cases beyond Libya. The mismatch between the successive Libyan governments' international and domestic recognition has led to the conclusion that building the latter—and the underpinning social contract—should always take precedence. This issue has been equally critical to the post-2021 contest between the military junta and the opposition's National Unity Government (NUG) in Myanmar. The NUG has significantly boosted its domestic recognition by increasing cooperation with ethnic armed groups exerting territorial control and is trying to leverage this in its so far unsuccessful struggle for international recognition (The Economist 2022). The tension between prioritizing legitimacy or effectiveness, which in the Libyan case has generally seen effectiveness prevail, haunts the still prevailing international consensus on withholding formal recognition of Afghanistan's Taliban government while pursuing "engagement without recognition" for humanitarian aid and security purposes (European External Action Service 2021; Toosi 2021). The dilemma between coherence and inclusivity in conflict mediation, which has resulted in a resolute shift towards

inclusivity in peacemaking initiatives for Libya, has likewise pushed many international actors to reverse course with regard to Venezuela's crisis. Chief among these are the EU member states, which stopped recognizing Guaidó as interim president to instead "engage and work with all stakeholders" in the country to "foster peaceful dialogue" (Council of the European Union 2021).

A future research agenda on the international (non)recognition of governments in IR should include further in-depth case studies of, and comparisons across, a variety of historical and contemporary controversies related to coups, revolutions, and civil wars, which would enable middle-range theorizing building on the recognition and international practice scholarship, among others. This could be complemented by more systematic and large-scale efforts of data collection and analysis, e.g., from UN archives. Exploring for macro-level patterns would allow us to provide more comprehensive answers to the question of who recognizes and why (see Kinne 2014), and to substantiate the extent to which "the frequency and effectiveness of the use of recognition or nonrecognition as a political instrument have depended both upon the distribution of power [. . .] and the degree of ideological conflict" (Krasner 1999, 15). Put differently, the aim would be to examine how international government recognition contests, norms and practices have been over time influenced by global order factors such as hegemonic transitions or "shocks" (Gunitsky 2017), the ups and downs of the liberal international order, as well as international norm contestation associated to bipolarity and multipolarity.

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