



INTERVIEW SERIES — PART 1 / 3

Hüseyin Ersin Takla

Chairman of the Board, TML İnşaat A.Ş.

The TML Journey

“ Our TML journey began in 1992, when our company was founded within the STFA group with the vision of taking on more active, more constructive projects and expanding our range of work.

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First Trip to Libya

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My history with Libya goes back quite a long way — as of today, I’m in my 53rd year with it. The day I first went to Libya was February 23, 1973. I remember landing at a simple airport — a leftover from the Second World War, no longer in use today but still in service until 2011, with a corrugated metal roof and bullet holes clearly visible on it. I remember being met there — may God grant him a long life, if he’s still with us — by Muhammed Laştar in his white Fiat 125. The way baggage was unloaded and handed over to passengers was quite interesting, too. Porters would carry the bags off the plane by hand and place them on a marble table; passengers would then collect their bags from that table.

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I can also share some demographic details about Libya as it was on February 23, 1973. The country's total population was 2.5 million, and the capital Tripoli was home to roughly 750,000 people, of whom around 400,000 were said to be foreign nationals. From these figures, we can say that foreign nationals made up more than half of Tripoli's population. As I mentioned, the figure cited for the country's population was 2.5 million, although no official census had actually been conducted.

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Milestone Projects

1992 **Garyan Hospital Renovation**

TML's first project in Libya

1992 **Sirte Farm Houses Project**

An important early project carried out with ODAC

2006 **Kufra Water Pipeline**

Joint venture with Tekfen

**2013-
2017** **Misurata Piled Discharge Wharves**

A major turning point in marine works

2026 **Omar Al-Mukhtar University**

A major turning point in building works

Milestone Projects

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First of all, I believe we should regard the very first project we undertook — regardless of its size, total value, or worth — as an important milestone in TML’s history. When we began operations in Libya in 1992, the first project we actually took on was the renovation of the hospital in Garyan. We carried out this project, which was genuinely important to us, through a joint venture we formed with the local Public Works Company. Around the same time, we also carried out various projects with ODAC, a longstanding partner of ours. Chief among these was the Farm Houses Project in Sirte.

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This project played an important role in TML’s entry into Libya, in our official registration in the country, and in enabling us to continue our operations in Libya uninterrupted through that registration to this day. In the period that followed, we carried out many different projects in Libya. Our Kufra Water Pipeline Project, a joint venture with Tekfen, is also very important to us. However, marine works have always held a special significance for us. From this perspective, our Piled Discharge Wharf Projects in Misurata are works that, both in value and in scope, absolutely deserve a special place in TML’s history and archive. In addition to giving us very substantial experience in marine structures, these projects also gave us an important opportunity to refocus on marine works after 1992. As part of these projects, we had two high-capacity, hydraulic-legged pontoons (check-up platforms) built for use in hydraulic pile-driving work. The numerous marine vessels and related machinery and equipment we acquired alongside them are still present in Misurata today and continue to be used in our operations.

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From 1973 to Today

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Libya, in my view, is the starting point of the Turkish contracting sector's expansion abroad. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that Libya is where the international experience of Turkish contracting — something we speak of with pride today — was born. Turkish contractors had their first significant experience abroad in Libya, and gained extremely valuable know-how in the process. For this reason, Libya's importance to the Turkish contracting sector is enormous.

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One of the starting points of this process was the Tripoli Port Project, signed on December 26, 1972. From that date onward, through various periods and phases up to today, Libya has been among the countries where both Turkish contractors and the Turkish workforce have been most heavily active. It's possible to illustrate the scale of this with figures. We know that in the first half of the 1980s, there were roughly 200,000 registered Turkish workers in Libya. Adding unregistered workers, that number likely reached around 250,000. Particularly for those years, I don't think we ever achieved a Turkish workforce presence of this scale in any other country. Because the Turkish workforce was competitive in the international market at the time, Turkish contractors were able to source nearly all the labor they needed for their projects from Turkey. Unfortunately, it must be said that today, due to economic conditions, the same cannot be said. The Turkish workforce has lost much of the competitive cost position it once held.

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For this reason, today we are only able to bring foremen and qualified technical staff above that level from Turkey. The workforce needed below that level, we source mainly from Asian countries or from local resources in the countries where we operate. In fact, this shift clearly reflects the transformation the Turkish contracting sector has undergone over the years. As competitive conditions have eroded, we've unfortunately had to hand over part of the role once played by Turkish labor to workers from other countries. During the unrest in Libya in 2011, if I remember correctly, the number of our employees we evacuated to Turkey was just over 18,000. When we compare this figure to the hundreds of thousands of Turkish workers once present in Libya, we can clearly see just how significantly the Turkish workforce's presence in the country has declined over time.

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Today and Tomorrow

Libya After the Revolution

Today and Tomorrow

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First of all, it should be noted that a revolution in any country is an extremely significant turning point, and in Libya it shifted the entire balance. As we all know, the political structure in Libya today has still not fully settled. There's an East-West divide in the country. In the West there is a government recognized by the United Nations, while in the East there is a parliament. The fact that the parliament is in the East and the recognized government is in the West, and that these two administrations have been unable to work together in the expected harmony, has had a serious impact both on the country's general situation and on the areas where Turkish contractors operate.

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It's not possible today to say that Libya's oil revenues are being directed entirely toward development projects the way they once were. There is a very serious need in the country to rebuild damaged infrastructure, superstructure, and industrial facilities. However, since the oil revenues generated aren't sufficient to meet all these needs, existing resources have to be prioritized. As a result, budgets for investments outside of vital, priority projects are being restricted. Naturally, this significantly narrows the business portfolio of Turkish contractors in Libya. Here it's worth specifically mentioning the projects of Turkish contractors that have remained suspended since 2011. The total figure cited for these projects is in the range of 12 to 18 billion US dollars. In any case, we can say that when the revolution began in 2011, Turkish contractors had a business potential of at least 12 billion US dollars in their portfolio. In addition, there is talk of accrued receivables of roughly 4 billion US dollars. Even though the confirmed amount exceeds 1 billion US dollars, it's clear that there remains a significant amount of earned receivables outstanding, alongside a machinery fleet that has suffered serious damage.

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Unfortunately, despite all the initiatives and the various bilateral agreements signed, no concrete result has been achieved on these matters to date. Following the 2011 revolution, an agreement was reached in 2020 regarding the future of the projects left over from the past. Today we are in 2026. But looking at the time that has passed since, we see that the expected progress toward relaunching these projects has not been achieved. From our own perspective, we also cannot yet speak of another process — whether for our infrastructure or port works in Misurata — that has been completed and handed over, with every issue, including letters of guarantee, fully resolved.

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One of the main reasons for this is that the relevant authorities have been unable to show sufficient, constructive action in making decisions and putting them into practice. To this we can add the rivalry between East and West, and budget problems. As a result, Libya today no longer has a business portfolio for Turkish contractors of the scale it once had. Looking at who is working where and at what scale today, we see that activity in the West is mostly focused on completing some smaller-scale jobs. By contrast, it's not easy to explain why an important investment like the Tripoli Port Project — for which the tender was awarded to us and the contract signed — has not been launched by the state for roughly two and a half years now. We can say the current situation in the West generally continues within this framework. In the East, we observe that some investment projects are being pursued to the extent financing can be secured, and that certain funds provide financing support. However, there isn't a sufficiently clear picture of how these relate to the budget system and other financial mechanisms accepted in the West.

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In conclusion, as long as political and administrative unity is not achieved in the country and the budget resources available for investment are not defined, it has to be said that the future in Libya does not look as bright for the Turkish contracting sector as it once did. It's stated that, in order to sustain current investments, Libya's existing resources have in the past been supplemented by roughly 5 billion US dollars from external sources. Therefore, without such additional resources being brought in, increasing the volume of investment won't be easy either. Alongside this, another major problem is that Libyan banks are not accepted by Turkish banks. This poses a serious obstacle to relaunching the suspended projects I mentioned earlier — from the past — before any discussion of taking on and starting newer projects. So who is filling the gap left in an area where Turkish contractors were once strong? As far as we can see, contracting companies from various countries — chiefly Egyptian and Tunisian firms — are increasingly taking up more space in that gap.

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DEİK and Business Council

The Founding of DEİK and the Work of the Libya-Turkey Business Council

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I served as Co-Chair of the Libya-Turkey Business Council, founded in 2004, alongside Muhammed Kanon, today's Chamber of Commerce President. At the time, we established the Business Council at a meeting also attended by our Minister Ertuğrul Günay, and in the years that followed we carried out extremely successful activities. Particularly after the developments in Libya following 2011, the problems facing the Turkish contracting sector and the burden it carried increased significantly. During this period, the Business Council became an important focal point for addressing the problems that arose in economic and commercial relations between Turkey and Libya, developing solutions, and putting them into practice.

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The Council took on an extremely constructive and determined role in matters including, above all, protecting the letters of guarantee of Turkish contractors, the safe evacuation of our citizens in Libya to Turkey, sustaining Turkey-Libya relations, building the cooperation and agreements reached to date, and maintaining exports between the two countries. Significant initiatives were undertaken, in particular, during the safe evacuation of our citizens located in Misurata and Benghazi. Likewise, intensive work was carried out to protect the letters of guarantee and the rights and receivables of Turkish contractors in Libya. After 2015, the Council's structure underwent a major transformation, evolving from a civil-society-type organization into a more institutional one. Alongside this, initiatives and activities aimed at resolving longstanding issues, protecting the rights and receivables of Turkish companies, and sustaining Turkey-Libya economic relations continued.

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Closing Notes

Comments and Additions

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After all these different periods and experiences, I especially want to say this: risks must be measured correctly and evaluated carefully, but this should never stand in the way of our entrepreneurial spirit. Business doesn't only develop in the office, at the table. Business relationships can bring you new opportunities at the moment and from the place you least expect; they can open new horizons and pave the way for new investments. As the Turkish saying goes, “an little stone may upset a large cart” — sometimes the most important opportunities arise from relationships or contacts you never anticipated.

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For this reason, I believe it's essential to place as much importance as possible on partnerships, building strong business relationships, making direct contact with people, and stepping outside the four walls of the office. Of course, I'm not saying problems can't be solved at the table. But to be able to produce solutions at the table, you first need to be out in the field, developing relationships, seeing developments firsthand, and making the right contacts. In other words, the issues you can resolve within four walls first need to be brought to that table from outside those four walls.

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Closing Notes

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Business and strong relationships don't grow in the office, at the table. To bring business to the table, you need to step outside those four walls and get into the field.

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TML

TML's Story: Generation to Generation 3 Perspectives

Part 1: A Delightful Conversation with our
Chairman Mr. Hüseyin Ersin Takla on Our Founding
Years and Libya, From 1973 to Today and
Tomorrow

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