



US in Libya: The Challenges of a Third Front against ISIL

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President Barack Obama's Administration is considering the opening of a critical third front against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Libya. However the country's political divisions and the alarming number of armed groups are not conducive to such an intervention, thus reducing America's ability to prevent the potential expansion of ISIL territory.

ISIL now controls over 150 miles along the Libyan coast, eyeing oil installations between Tripoli and Benghazi. The strategic location of the country had attracted the attention of the international community that sees progress in the Libyan peace talks as critical to preventing spillover effects. The country stands on the verge of potentially becoming a magnet for foreign fighters and a transit for illegal migration to Europe, with risks that impact neighboring countries in North Africa and West Africa's Sahel region.

The arduous efforts of the United Nations to reconcile differences between the Tobruq-based House of Representatives (HoR) in the east and the Tripoli-based General National Congress (GNC) in the west were culminated in the December 17 political agreement. However, the Presidency Council (for the Council of Ministers), formed as a result of this agreement and considered the highest executive branch, requires an elusive unanimity to function and offers no procedural guarantees to manage political conflict. The UN-backed presidential council in Libya announced on February 14 a revised unity government that has reshuffled alliances east and west of the country, with hardliners on both sides rejecting the new deal. A product of quota allocation representing Libya's tribes and regions, the 18-ministers cabinet was submitted on February 16 to the HoR for a vote of confidence and is turning, until now, into a third government in exile.

At the center of Libya's latest political transition is Brigadier General Khalifa Haftar. Once a key figure in Moammar Qadhafi's circle, he defected to the United States after a failed coup attempt while a prisoner of war in Chad. After returning to post revolution Libya, he led in 2014 the "Dignity" campaign to fight the "Libya Dawn" coalition of Islamists.

Haftar is a force to reckon with, however his proneness to fighting rivals makes him less able to lead to a consensus. The political reverberation of the meeting between the newly appointed Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and Haftar on January 30 was a prelude to the difficult transition awaiting the country. The balance of power inside the Presidency Council is not in favor of the Brigadier General who is resisting attempts to circumvent his power, in particular the appointment of Colonel Mehdi al-Barghathi as Defense Minister to oversee the national army. Against the backdrop of this complex political and security environment, the US is weighing its Libya options.

US takes another look at Libya

President Obama is under pressure from the Pentagon to take action in Libya¹, however a “wait and see” approach is prevailing at the White House. The US is currently pursuing a three-track strategy in Libya: 1) gathering intelligence and laying the ground for a possible intervention; 2) pursuing diplomacy to advance the national unity government; and 3) continuing to target ISIL leaders as needed. The challenges on the first two tracks are putting the brakes on any intervention.

Gathering intelligence on the ground has always been a difficult process in Libya. When the US intelligence operations in Benghazi and Tripoli were forced to close in the past years, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) continued to employ informants on the ground and intercept electronic communications and satellite imagery. Yet, the risks associated with intervention are high for US assets. When a secret commando force of 20 US soldiers went to Wattiya airbase on December 14, Libya’s air force jeopardized the mission by posting their photos² on its Facebook page (before deleting them). Shortly after, unidentified members of a local militia asked US soldiers to leave claiming they had no permission to be at the base.

On the diplomatic front, the US has been striving to navigate a wide array of regional and international interests in Libya: from neighboring countries in North Africa concerned about a possible intervention to ISIL’s connection with Boko Haram in West Africa, as well as the involvement of Egypt and Gulf allies in Libya. US diplomacy has been reactive and keeping a relatively low profile with limited success in swaying regional players to cooperate on Libya.

However, US military raids are succeeding in their clandestine missions operating from an airport in the Sicilian island of Pantelleria. In August 2013, the elite forces captured Ahmed Abu Khattala, the Benghazi leader of Ansar al-Shariaa who was allegedly behind the attack that killed US Ambassador Chris Stevens in September 2012. A US military strike in November 2015 killed Abu Nabil al-Anbari, the Iraqi born leader of ISIL in Libya, and just recently the target of another strike on February 20 was an ISIL training camp in Sabratha 60 miles east of the border with Tunisia.

The range of options available to the US for a possible Libyan intervention are confined to airstrikes, gathering intelligence, conducting raids, and deploying a small contingency of elite forces to assist and train Libyan forces. The ideal scenario for a successful intervention would be for the new unity government to exert control over a unified national army, however there is a slim chance the GNA will be able to reform the security sector or unanimously request a Western intervention.

¹ Eric Schmitt. Obama is pressed to open military front against ISIS in Libya. *The New York Times*. February 4, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/05/world/africa/isis-libya-us-special-ops.html?ref=topics>

² Chris Stephen. Secret U.S. mission in Libya revealed after air force posted picture. *The Guardian*. December 17, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/17/secret-us-mission-in-libya-revealed-after-air-force-posted-pictures>

If the US ends up committing to a support for a Libyan army under Haftar or intervening without the tacit approval of the General National Congress, restoring stability in Tripoli will likely be hard to achieve and Islamist groups in the west will be further radicalized, potentially joining forces with ISIL. As long as there is no legitimate government or reliable partners on the ground, the most likely scenario is for US airstrikes and commando raids to continue striking ISIL leaders with or without the tacit agreement of the unity government.

Next steps for Libya

Three key developments in the coming weeks and months will define the future of Libya's political transition: 1) the selection of the armed forces or groups that will lead the battle to regain control of the capital Tripoli; 2) the way Haftar will challenge the new political establishment; and 3) the protection of the unity government and its institutions on the ground.

With a relentless war against Islamists in the east and a defying reluctance to deal with remnants of the Qadhafi regime in the west, there is a high probability that the GNA will gradually become a lame duck cabinet. If the national ceasefire did not hold, the HoR might look again to Haftar for protection.

Furthermore, disbanding militias in an environment of distrust is not likely. The GNA is expected to collect, within 60 days of the ceasefire's entry into force, all medium and heavy weapons of militias. A committee should be formed to monitor the implementation of the agreed security arrangements, including the withdrawal of armed militias from oil installations. The militias that are part of the security sector have independent pockets of power and are not fully integrated in the security establishment.

The US and Western ability to impact the security sector structure and its power struggle is limited. The international community's leverage on Libyan politics is restricted to ceasing official contact with non-GNA institutions and linking military assistance to forming a unified national army. The plans to make fighting ISIL and subordination to the unity government the two preconditions for US assistance to armed groups, will likely have no impact as the flow of arms continue from regional backers. Furthermore, a Western effort to coordinate the battle against ISIL among the armed groups is unrealistic. For now, deterring ISIL depends on armed Libyans and their regional backers.

Both governments in Tripoli and Tobruq are showing readiness to fight ISIL yet are not warming up to the idea of a US intervention. Unless Washington takes sides in the Libyan conflict, there is no local appetite to host a meaningful US role that will prioritize fighting ISIL instead of continuing the larger fight of who controls the country.

Libya does not have the sectarian divide of similar conflicts in the Middle East. Establishing a sustainable ISIL stronghold is difficult to achieve in light of the tribal and geographical nature of the Libyan coast. The urgency to act against ISIL in Libya should not mean rushing the political process and a better approach for the US would consist of three steps: 1) making sure Libya's neighbors are invested in the country's stability by regulating cross border movement of fighters and engaging them in the discussions about Libya along with European allies; 2) leading a diplomatic effort to bridge the gap between influential regional players in Libyan politics; and 3) focusing on the comparative advantage of the US in gathering intelligence on ISIL fighters in Libya and targeting them when needed.

The challenge of how to balance the perceived imminent threat of ISIL with the long-term need to build the structure of a viable state in Libya remains daunting. At this point, military intervention and promoting stability in Libya do not seem to be mutually reinforcing. Looking at Libya from the prism of ISIL alone will only be counterproductive.

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