



Libya after ISIL: What Will Trump Do?

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It is safe to say that at present, Libya might not be high on the agenda of President Donald Trump's Administration. In December 2016, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) was eradicated from its stronghold in Sirte, prompting Washington to shift focus away from Libya. Since Trump is drawn to autocratic leaders like the Russian and Egyptian presidents, Vladimir Putin and Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, Libyans are wondering whether a policy shift is possible to bring the United States closer to former General Khalifa Haftar, the strong man and leader of the self-proclaimed Libyan national army who is challenging the western-backed Government of National Accord (GNA).

Obama's Legacy in Libya: A Last Stand in Sirte

When asked in April 2016 about the "worst mistake" of his time in office, President Barack Obama [replied](#): "Probably failing to plan for the day after" the 2011 US intervention in Libya. Acting while the US Congress was in recess, the Obama Administration had to rush into action, as Muammar Qadhafi was threatening to massacre Libyans in Benghazi, but then prematurely declared victory thereafter.

Libya was not Obama's war of choice; he knew going in that Washington under his reign would not seek nation building in a failed state. The low profile and brief US intervention had cost no American lives and had a price tag of \$1.1 billion; however, the US government did not want to "own" the broken country. In that sense, Obama's mistake was not "failing to plan for the day after" as much as it was finding himself compelled to follow the French and British governments' lead in participating in the Libya conflict, without raising fundamental questions beyond the military outcome or what Russia's views might have been.

Since the September 2012 assassination of US ambassador Christopher Stevens in Benghazi, Libya became not only a contentious issue in US politics but an area where Washington is more reluctant to invest resources.

However, two major developments made the Obama Administration rethink its approach in 2016. A widespread recognition [emerged](#) in Washington that a surgical operation might be needed after ISIL built its capabilities in Sirte, controlling around 120 miles of the Libyan coast and recruiting over 6,000 fighters, according to western intelligence [estimates](#). However, the Obama White House was hesitant to act with no partner on the ground.

Once the GNA was formed—part of the December 2015 Libyan political agreement—a military operation to liberate Sirte began in May 2016. At the request of the GNA, the Pentagon conducted 367 airstrikes against ISIL targets in Sirte between August 1 and October 31. A small unit of US special forces was also deployed for the first time to [coordinate](#) airstrikes with Libyan forces and provide intelligence information. Even on the eve of Trump’s inauguration, on January 19, 2017, Obama authorized airstrikes that killed 80 ISIL fighters in two camps southwest of Sirte.

Obama left behind two major turning points in US policy on Libya: the military defeat of ISIL and a loose US military coordination with the GNA. Yet, since 2012 there has been no clear US strategy on how to address Libya’s political crisis so the country does not fall again into a civil war or into the hands of radical elements.

New Trends in the Libyan Conflict

New trends are emerging in the Libyan conflict: ISIL is no longer an imminent threat, the GNA is weaker than ever before, and the Europeans are courting Haftar. Most importantly, two developments can potentially shift the contours of the Libyan conflict and strengthen foreign intervention: the resumption of oil production and the nascent involvement of Russia in Libya.

While GNA-led forces were focusing on Sirte in the second half of 2016, Haftar’s troops seized control of oil terminals in Ras Lanuf, Sidra, Zuwaytania, and Brega in what is known as the “oil crescent” along the Libyan coast. After defeating the Petroleum Facilities Guard led by Ibrahim Jadhraan, a close ally of the GNA, Haftar [handed](#) the seized oil terminals to Libya’s National Oil Corporation. Soon after, a deal was reached to resume oil exports from eastern Libya; ultimately, this might have impact on the global oil market if daily production returns to prewar levels.

Haftar has shaped the Libyan status quo in a way that no long-term or comprehensive solution can be reached without his consent. Indeed, international efforts are underway to integrate Haftar in the institutions that emanated from the Libyan political agreement and to secure a meeting for him with Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj. This belated effort to reconcile the GNA with Haftar is driven by two motivations: illegal migration to Europe and Russia’s growing influence in Libya.

A Plan to Help Curb Migration to Europe

The European Commission devised a plan to address the movement of migrants across the central Mediterranean, where a record 181,000 individuals crossed from Libya to Europe in 2016. The [plan](#), which was unanimously approved by EU leaders on February 3, 2017, seeks to curb the flow of migrants and improve the conditions of Libyan camps housing them. Europeans believe that a strong and united Libyan government is needed to achieve these goals. The concern, however, is whether European pressure will compel Libyan authorities to dedicate their scarce resources to

controlling their maritime borders, tracking smugglers, and housing illegal migrants in detention centers—instead of focusing on restoring stability across Libya.

On the other hand, speeding up the European rapprochement with Haftar is likely motivated as well by Russia's recent attempts to engage the Libyan general. In the wake of the situation in Ukraine, the last thing Europeans want is to have Russian leverage over migration from Libya. European leaders are hoping to peel Haftar away from Russia before it is too late. Obviously, the timing of the Russia's attention to Libya is not coincidental.

Russia's Involvement in Libya

The depth of Moscow's involvement in Libya should not be underestimated. On January 11, when Haftar visited a Russian aircraft carrier off the coast of Tobruk, he had a video conference with Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu. It was [reported](#) that he signed an agreement authorizing Moscow to build two military bases near Tobruk and Benghazi. The next step might be deploying Russian special forces in eastern Libya. Weeks later, 70 soldiers from Haftar's army [went to Russia](#) via Egypt to receive medical treatment. If Moscow further expands that cooperation and moves to provide military support for Haftar, this will likely be a game changer and will surely strengthen his political ambitions.

Indeed, the Russian foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said in a [press briefing](#) on February 3 that the Libyan national army "could be the backbone of the united Libyan armed forces" while calling Haftar a "political heavyweight." There is no question that Russia and Egypt have interests in Libyan oil as well as the need for Egypt to have a secure border with Libya. It is also worth reminding that Haftar's political support comes not only from Russia and Egypt; French forces have also been operating since last year from al-Khadim airport in Marj, the city where Haftar has his headquarters, in an effort to combat terrorists who can potentially plan attacks on French territories.

What Trump Could Do Differently

The Trump Administration has shown a clear intent to intensify targeting ISIL and will no doubt continue launching strikes as intelligence information becomes available. However, the challenge in Libya is no longer about ISIL.

The White House will have to decide either to work with Russia, ignore its nascent influence, or deter it. The Egyptian, Russian, and Emirati support will likely ensure that Washington will continue on the path of not challenging Haftar. While the Obama Administration was unmistakably clear about supporting the government of Prime Minister al-Sarraj, it did not move swiftly and firmly to condemn Haftar's attempts to undermine the legitimacy of the GNA. Instead, in May

2016, the US Treasury Department only [sanctioned](#) Aguila Saleh, the head of the Tobruk-based House of Representatives. The US concern was that sanctioning Haftar would have sent a message that Washington was actively taking sides in the Libyan conflict.

The first Libyan test for the Trump Administration came when the self-proclaimed Libyan national guard entered Tripoli in early February 2017 and seized control of government properties in a challenge to the weak authority of the GNA. This reemergence of the General National Congress (GNC) in Tripoli is a reaction to Haftar asserting his power in the western part of the country. The State Department issued a low-profile [statement](#) that conformed to the Obama Administration's previous narrative, condemning this takeover in Tripoli, reiterating that "disunity" among Libyans "only benefits" ISIL, and urging Libyans to work toward national reconciliation.

Indeed, the Egyptian government is mediating between al-Sarraj and Haftar, who are currently in Cairo. Among the suggestions is to have Haftar lead the newly formed presidential council while al-Sarraj would remain as prime minister. However, Haftar feels the wind is behind his back and remains reluctant to concede the GNA legitimacy.

The Libyan general made clear what he hopes would happen. "If Russia and the United States come together in order to stamp out terrorism that can help us. We are going to shake their hands. We will align with them," he [said](#) on February 5. If Haftar's wishes are met, this will likely be at the expense of the Europeans—and the White House should understand European sensitivity on migration. The Trump Administration will ultimately have to assess if a Russian foothold in the south of the Mediterranean is a threat to US national security.

While there is no appetite or need for the United States to be involved directly in the Libyan conflict, events are moving fast on the ground. Al-Sarraj has failed to extend his control over the western part of Libya and is struggling to exert influence on forces in Misrata and Tripoli. Libya is governed by weak institutions and the West, in general, is no longer invested in nation building, preferring quick fixes instead—hence the appeal of Haftar as the strong leader who can deliver.

Yet, there are concerns about his tendency to seek absolute power and **take** revenge **on** his opponents. In the future, Russia and Egypt will seek to be the guarantors who keep Haftar in check; however, Libyan politics is complicated and no one foreign power can claim to have control over events on the ground. For the first time in years, a convergence of foreign interests is pushing Libyans toward reconciliation, which represents a unique opportunity to put the country back on the path to stability.

The most plausible approach is for the Trump Administration to make clear to Russia that while engaging Haftar is welcomed in the context of uniting Libya, Moscow should not violate the United Nations embargo on the sale of weapons or undermine the GNA, nor should it fuel the

conflict in Libya. What will happen in Libya in 2017 will largely depend on what steps Haftar will take and on how the Trump Administration will shape its relations with Moscow.

US interests are better served if stability is restored in Libya and the country no longer serves as a hub for foreign terrorists in north Africa and the Sahel region. However, defeating ISIL is not enough to stabilize Libya. Washington should publicly voice support for integrating Haftar into the [Libyan Political Agreement](#) of December 2015 as the only path forward, while taking into consideration the grievances of factions in the eastern part of the country. Supporting the efforts of Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, and Italy is key to achieving these goals while not falling into the trap of directly intervening in Libyan politics or renegotiating the parameters of the current status of the agreement. Indeed, the Trump Administration should not repeat the Obama Administration's mistake of not planning "for the day after." Libya was neglected in 2012 and this should not happen again.