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About this Series

Op-Med is an ongoing series of opinion pieces on topical issues in Mediterranean politics from a transatlantic perspective. The series brings together European, North American, and southern Mediterranean experts through the German Marshall Fund–Istituto Affari Internazionali strategic partnership. The series examines key questions surrounding the political, societal, and economic evolution of specific Mediterranean countries as well as the broader regional and international dynamics at play in the Mediterranean region as a whole.

A Western Strategy for Libya

by Wolfgang Puzstai

Libya has disappeared from Western headlines, even though the situation on the ground is going from bad to worse. How long can the West afford to ignore this disaster?

The Strategic Context

The strategic context in Libya has been characterized by constant instability since the revolution in 2011. Abductions, assassinations, and tribal fighting are taking place every day. Work in the General National Congress (GNC) reflects the social and political fragmentation in the country, resulting in the near total paralysis of the state.

The country is confronted with four main internal challenges emanating from past historical developments and the complex trajectory of the country in the last three years: the inability of the government to impose its will and retain the monopoly on violence, the rising influence of radical Islamists, the legacy of the chaotic state administration under the regime of Col. Muammar Gaddafi and numerous centuries old tribal conflicts in several parts of the country.¹

1 See Wolfgang Puzstai, "Libya: A Country on the Brink. Root Causes of the Current Situation and Possible Solutions," *ISPI Policy Briefs*, No. 226, March 2014, <http://www.ispionline.it/en/node/9931>.

On the external front, Libya continues to be the hub of a widespread system of trans-border crime, terrorism, and instability. Parts of Fezzan and Cyrenaica are a "safe haven" for terrorist groups operating in neighboring countries. Libyan weapons are spread all over the region. Minorities like the Berber, the Tuareg, and the Toubou, as well as the Awlād Alī² are settling not only in Libya, but also in its neighborhood, which could facilitate a spillover of conflicts into neighboring countries.

The strategic decision-making of a country is heavily influenced by its own domestic context, including public opinion. For this reason, increasing Western engagement in Libya does not seem to be high on either the United States' or Europe's agenda. Public attention is on the Crimean crisis and Ukraine, while U.S. foreign policy focus is in any case shifting away from the Atlantic to the Pacific. At the same time, there are still major economic challenges to be overcome by several EU countries, in particular the southern ones. So, why should the West engage more in Libya?

2 The Awlād Alī, a Libyan-Arab tribe, was expelled to Egypt in the 18th and 19th century. Currently, 100,000 of them live in Libya and about 2 million are resident in Egypt.

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The Strategic Interests

The United States and Europe had a decisive role in overthrowing the Gaddafi regime and are now morally obliged to support the young Libyan democracy in order to make it a success story. In addition, Europe has substantial, if not vital, strategic interests in the country.³

All Western countries share security concerns with regard to terrorism, weapons smuggling, and regional stability. Libya needs to be prevented from becoming a failed state on Europe's doorstep. Further EU security interests are linked to preventing illegal immigration and drug trafficking. While the U.S. trade volume with Libya is quite limited, several EU nations have significant economic stakes in Libya. Furthermore, Libyan oil has become more important following the Ukraine crisis.

The Objective: Fostering a Successful Transition Process

The aim of the transition process must be a stable, democratic Libya that is able to benefit from its natural resources to promote socio-economic development for its population and prevent terrorist and organized crime networks from using its territory to stage operations.

This process cannot be dictated from outside. It must be led by the Libyans according to the wishes of the population. Since Gaddafi did not build up a functioning administration and destroyed what was left of the Italian colonial administration, the new Libyan state must be built up almost from scratch. Such a gargantuan task cannot be achieved without proper external support.

Various bilateral support programs and training activities have been implemented. The most prominent examples are Italy's various programs for political, economic, cultural, and scientific cooperation⁴ as well as for defense.⁵ The U.K. also has a number of initiatives aimed at building accountable and human rights-compliant security and justice structures, creating transparent and effective financial

³ Although the stability of Libya is of vital interest for, for instance, Italy, for several other European countries lying further away from the Mediterranean and more affected by other crises, this is only of secondary importance. For the United States, the stability of Libya is important, but not vital. This has a severe impact on the (dis-)unity of effort in the international community.

⁴ See the website of the Italian Embassy in Tripoli: *I rapporti bilaterali*, http://www.amb-tripoli.esteri.it/Ambasciata_Tripoli/Menu/I_rapporti_bilaterali.

⁵ Italian Ministry of Defence, *Italia-Libia: accordi di cooperazione*, November 28, 2013, http://www.difesa.it/Primo_Piano/Pagine/Italia_Libia.aspx.

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management, and strengthening private sector development and economic governance systems.⁶ Finally, the United States has launched its programs with regard to democracy, governance, rule of law, human rights, economic recovery, health, and security assistance.⁷

The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) conducts many useful activities, but frequently merely scratches the surface of the problem. Writing sophisticated reports like a Defense White Paper does not make any difference on the ground if there is no implementation. The EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) Libya is also a step in the right direction, but much more needs to be done to enable the Libyans to control their borders. Altogether, the current support is limited. Furthermore, sometimes it is difficult to find suitable volunteers for training programs, and cooperation with the Libyan authorities is challenging. Complicated structures, constantly changing counterparts, and the security environment can make the job extremely complex.

Courses of Action for a Western Strategy

There are three main courses of action for a Western strategy toward Libya. First, the current low level of support could continue more or less as it is now. This would most probably mean that Libya will slowly slide into chaos.

Second, a Western military intervention would be unwise: it makes no sense at the moment and could in any case only be conducted with a Libyan invitation and under the umbrella of the United Nations. But as the gap between “too early” and “already too late” is likely to shrink signifi-

⁶ U.K. Foreign Secretary William Hague, *U.K. bilateral support to Libya*, written statement to parliament delivered on July 9, 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/uk-bilateral-support-to-libya>.

⁷ See the website of the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli, U.S. Partnerships in Libya, <http://libya.usembassy.gov/partnerships.html>.

cantly as security conditions deteriorate, some contingency planning is needed. The purpose of such a mission could be to gain time for the Libyan authorities to build-up the basic institutions of a functioning state by providing basic security and training. The forces on the ground would have to come mainly from Muslim countries. This should reduce religiously motivated attacks on the international force and facilitate the acceptance of foreign soldiers by the Libyans. A leading role for the Arab League should be carefully evaluated. But in light of the limited experience of the League in these kinds of operations and the involvement of several Arab countries in Libyan politics, this would probably complicate things instead of making them easier.

The third and best course of action is significantly enhanced support in the key areas of state building. Prudent long-term strategic planning and coordinated implementation are paramount for success.

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The Plan: Investing in State Building

State building needs a comprehensive approach. This includes tackling all relevant sectors of the state. In order to develop a proper plan, it is mandatory to analyze the key indicators of stability in Libya⁸ and identify how they can be influenced in a positive way. As the relation among these indicators is based on interdependence, a coordinated, multi-dimensional plan of action is necessary.

This approach should involve an in-depth analysis of the real needs, followed by a prioritization of the tasks, as not everything can be accomplished at the same time.

⁸ Several of these indicators are mentioned in Wolfgang Puzstai, "The Future Developments in Libya. A mid-term forecast," presentation at the IAI seminar on *Where is Libya going? A mid-term outlook*, Rome, December 7, 2012, http://www.iai.it/pdf/convegni/Puzstai_121207.pdf. An update is currently in progress.

The highest priorities for state building are:

- Strengthening security organizations, including the police, the military, border guards, and perhaps paramilitary forces ("National Guard").
- Setting up a functioning institutional framework including all the different sectors, such as the public administration, the executive, the legislature (with particular attention to the constitution-making process), and the judiciary with the overall aim of ensuring good governance.⁹
- Supporting the building of civil society, in particular trade unions, private voluntary organizations, and political parties.
- Reforming the economic structure by ensuring at first the continued profitable exploitation of hydrocarbon resources, while at the same time enforcing strategies to diversify the economy and fight corruption.
- Promoting infrastructure development and the smooth provision of basic services.
- Fostering reconciliation, first locally and subsequently nation-wide.

Western advice, training and practical support would be invaluable for the success of this process.

A Step-by-Step Approach

It is impossible to succeed in all these tasks at the same time all over the country. Therefore, it is necessary to focus at first on the capital, Benghazi, and Sebha, and thereafter on regions where success could be relatively easily achieved to provide an example for the others. While there are priorities, a comprehensive approach addressing all the different fields mentioned above needs to be devised and implemented. There must always be simultaneous progress.

In order to coordinate this effectively, a "Lead Nation" should be designated for specific project areas, wherever appropriate. As it is unrealistic to train all the required Libyan personnel, a "train-the-trainer" approach should be pursued in parallel to the training of each first batch.

⁹ See Andreas Gorzewski, "Libya looks to past for new constitution," *Deutsche Welle*, April 12, 2014, <http://dw.de/p/1BglZ>.

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Of the many high priority tasks to be accomplished, the build-up of security forces is of particular concern. No state can function if it cannot retain its monopoly on the use of force in at least some key areas of its territory. Therefore, a step-by-step build-up of security forces is urgent and essential. The current training initiative for a “general purpose force” by the United States, Italy, and several other countries could be a major step in the right direction in order to create a force capable of protecting the institutions, facilities, and infrastructures of the Libyan state, as well as ensuring stability and security. But training these forces is not enough. They must also be equipped properly and possibly mentored in action.

As history shows, reconciliation is a lengthy process, so it needs to be initiated soon and has to grow in parallel to state building. Further fragmentation through the separation of the various groups and tribes is not an option. First of all, it is necessary to ensure that the divide does not widen. At the same time, frozen conflicts, in particular between the tribes, have to be avoided. Otherwise they would constitute a latent threat to local stability. The intended establishment of a “National Dialogue Commission” is a very important step. Germany and Austria can be used as positive examples of how to deal with the heritage of a bloody dictatorship.

A disarmament, demobilization, and reconciliation process cannot be undertaken in isolation. It must be embedded in a wider approach. The whole environment has to be shaped in a way that makes membership in a militia as well as the resort to private weapons less attractive and unnecessary. At the right time, there must be additional incentives for the people to hand in their weapons.

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Threats and Opportunities

Keeping the main obstacles identified above in mind, one has to be realistic. Not everybody shares the same goals. Radical Islamists and criminals will continue to do their best to prevent the transition process from becoming a success. In order to prevent the derailment of the Libyan transition, it is important for external actors to send clear signals to the Libyans, urging them to be patient and to cultivate relations with each other.

Furthermore, the ascent of federalism is a challenge for the country, but it could also be an opportunity.¹⁰ Until the 20th century, Libya had never been a united country. There have always been historic rifts between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, which worsened under Gaddafi. The Libyan constitution of 1951 was federalist, granting the three regions major powers. In this light, it would make sense to empower the three historic regions as a way to solve local problems, if this is mutually agreed. The current behavior of the government toward the struggle against the radical Islamists in and around Benghazi will lead to further alienation anyway.

Conclusions

In the mid-term, Libya will remain highly unstable with a weak central government, largely autonomous or even semi-independent cities or regions, and a civil war-like situation in some parts of the country. This will allow some regions of Libya to continue to provide a safe haven for terrorists. Criminals will exploit the situation for smuggling and human trafficking. But the path to this future scenario is not unalterable. It can and must be influenced.

In order to shape a better future for Libya, several positive elements have to be built upon. The huge hydrocarbon resources could be the foundation of a successful economy. The country is by and large ethnically homogenous. The minorities do not seek an independent state, not even autonomy. More than 97 percent of the population is Muslim. A conflict between religions (as, for example, in Nigeria) can therefore be ruled out.

The sooner proper measures are undertaken and the more focused they are, the easier it is to push the “ship” in the

10 With regard to the federalism problem see Vincenzo Nigro, “Fra le tribù del petrolio. ‘Mezza Libia è nostra,’” *La Repubblica*, April 4, 2014, http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2014/04/04/news/libia_tribu_petrolio-82687869; Vincenzo Nigro, “Cirenaica: parla Jadran, il leader federalista,” *La Repubblica*, 4 aprile 2014, http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2014/04/04/news/libia_intervista_ibrahim_jadran-82688423.

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right direction. A virtuous circle through visible improvements must be set in motion. Ordinary people must see that the situation is getting better. They must feel that they have something worth fighting for.

In this light, more Western support is badly needed, in particular for state building. Unfortunately, even though there is disturbing news from Libya almost every day, it does not look like the majority of Western nations have realized the threat that could emerge from a permanently unstable Libya.

In parallel, the Libyan people must also be willing to accept advice and work together and not against each other. This should be facilitated by a conference of all Libyan stakeholders. This event should be led and sponsored by the international community outside of Libya. Its aim would be to find a (minimum) consensus on the way ahead and the cornerstones of the future Libyan state.

Supporting Libya is not only a moral obligation, but also a Western interest. Therefore a solid Western strategy, coordinated with the Libyans, is necessary. Otherwise, the legitimacy and credibility of Western interventions like the one that contributed to ending Gaddafi's rule could be questioned in the future.

About the Author

Colonel Wolfgang Puztai is a security and policy analyst, and was the Austrian defense attaché in Libya from 2008-12. The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not reflect the position of the Austrian Ministry of Defense. The author is grateful to Mattia Toaldo, European Council on Foreign Relations, and Silvia Colombo, IAI, for providing several valuable comments on the draft.

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