Fighting the Islamic State in Libya: by political means first

By Virginie Collombier

Executive summary

Libya entered a new spiral of violence in early 2015, with jihadist attacks claimed by the Islamic State succeeding one another and renewed armed confrontation between the country's two main political-military coalitions. Among Western governments, consensus has so far prevailed on the necessity to privilege political instruments in order to address the escalating crisis. However, progress on the political front can only be reached if the United Nations-led mediation effort receives more significant and sustained support.

Libya entered a new spiral of violence in early 2015, with jihadist attacks claimed by the Islamic State (IS) succeeding one another and renewed armed confrontation between the country's two main competing political-military coalitions – Libyan Dawn ("Fajr Libya") and the reinstituted General National Congress (GNC) in Tripoli, on the one hand, and General Haftar's Dignity ("Karama") Campaign and the elected House of Representatives (HoR) in Tobruk, on the other.

Following the January 28th attack on the five-star Hotel Corinthia in Tripoli and the beheading of 21 Egyptian Copts in the city of Sirte on February 15th, the suicide attacks by IS militants in the eastern city of al-Quba (between al-Bayda and Darnah) that killed more than 40 people on February 20th confirmed – if it needed to be – that a new threshold had been reached and that the risk of the situation getting totally out of control was real.

In such a context, reactions by the international community and individual Western countries interested in developments in Libya have so far been quite balanced and restrained. Following a moment of high tension characterised by bellicose rhetoric and military threats, notably on the part of France and Italy, consensus has so far prevailed on the necessity of privileging political instruments to address the escalating crisis.

The decision to adhere to this approach was based on the understanding that there can be no efficient military action against jihadist groups in Libya as long as a political deadlock persists in the country and there is no legitimate authority to work with on the ground. However, given the ever-increasing complexity of the conflict – because of regional interference and disputes among domestic actors – progress on the political front can only be made if the United Nations (UN)-led mediation effort receives more significant and sustained support from individual governments.

Egypt's decisive contribution to the spillover of violence

While the recent escalation of violence should mainly be seen as the consequence of an IS strategy to extend its operations westwards, taking advantage of the political vacuum, proliferation of weapons and opportunities for profitable criminal activities in Libya, Egypt's direct military involvement in the crisis also proved crucial in triggering chain reactions on the ground.

Coming one day after the broadcast of a video of the assassination of 21 of its nationals, the air attacks conducted by F-16 fighter jets against IS elements in the eastern city of Darnah sent a strong signal that the Egyptian government would not stand idly by as its national security was being threatened and its citizens directly targeted. By doing so, however, Egypt also sent another signal to the main belligerents competing for political power in Libya: that the current crisis could be addressed by military means.

Cairo had been calling for military action against "terrorist groups" operating in Libya for months, yet without making clear which groups exactly this label was referring to. By doing so, Egypt endorsed at an early stage the Tobruk camp's narrative presenting Libya's crisis as the fight of legitimate elected institutions against terrorist Islamist groups threatening these institutions – a narrative that echoed what the Egyptian authorities also consider to be their challenge at home. In the increasingly violent conflict opposing the Dignity Campaign and the HoR, on the one hand, and the Libyan Dawn coalition of Islamist and regional forces dominating Tripoli and the west, on the other, Egypt picked sides early, providing clear political and more discreet military support to the former. On two occasions in August 2014 Egypt allowed United Arab Emirates aircraft to use its bases to conduct air strikes on Islamist militia positions in Tripoli.

Against such a background, Egypt's February 16th air raid could not be seen by Libya's rival political-military coalitions as an operation against jihadist militants only, but rather as a major step towards supporting the Hafter-HoR camp more openly and directly.

Instead of contributing to reducing the threat posed by jihadist groups in Libya and beyond, Egypt's direct military action has unleashed a new spiral of violence and intensified the military confrontation between Libya's two main competing factions. Notably, it was reported that Libyan Dawn forces carried out two reprisal air strikes against their rivals from the western city of Zintan on February 17th (Kirkpatrick, 2015). As for the HoR and the Tobruk government, since then they have been calling for more Egyptian strikes on "terrorist targets" and more international support to reinforce what they call Libya's "national army".

Egypt followed up on this request. Having failed to build support at the UN for an international military intervention, Egypt instead advocated lifting the embargo on arms sales to Libya to the benefit of the Tobruk government, insisting on the need to build the capacity of Libya's national army to combat terrorism (Nichols, 2015).

The risks of international military intervention

Had the UN Security Council approved it, the proposal to lift the arms embargo would have proved extremely detrimental to both the fight against jihadist groups and the prospect of a political settlement between Libya's rival coalitions.

Despite the claims of the HoR and the Tobruk government, there is indeed no such thing as a national Libyan army fighting under their command and control, but rather a collection of former army elements, and tribal and regional militias who have engaged in a battle not only against those extremist groups responsible for incremental violence in eastern Libya, but also, increasingly, against all those who

do not share their views of how national political and military institutions should have been reshaped after Qaddafi's fall from power.

Undoubtedly, the ambiguity of the Libyan Dawn coalition's position towards extremist groups over the past months, notably through a de facto alliance with Ansar al-Sharia against retired general Haftar's forces in Benghazi, or more recently during the battle in the oil-rich sector of Ben Jawad, close to the city of Sirte, has comforted the common narrative of the HoR and the Egyptian government. Yet such alliances on the ground were precisely triggered by Haftar's launching of a military campaign against all those he labelled "terrorist Islamist groups" in May 2014, thereby lumping together Ansar al-Sharia militants, members of Islamist brigades, and other revolutionary brigades without acknowledging the diversity of their ideological positions and political objectives.

For European and Western governments, framing the current crisis through the use of such a narrative and responding to the call of the Egyptian and Tobruk governments would amount to considering that IS elements and the armed groups supporting Libyan Dawn in Misrata, Tripoli and other western cities are two sides of the same coin and should be fought as a unified grouping using the same military means.

This would also mean that the declared intention of armed groups from Misrata to retake the city of Sirte by launching a military offensive against IS elements has not been taken seriously (*Libya Herald*, 2015), although it might indicate that IS's expansion and use of extreme violence could indeed be conducive to a reshaping of military and political coalitions on the ground, with some rival groups agreeing on the need to unite to counter the jihadist threat.

Instead of contributing to reducing the jihadist threat in Libya and beyond, for the international community and Western countries to follow Egypt's lead would at least have two significantly opposite results.

Firstly, following Egypt's lead would risk pushing the politicians and armed groups that are part of the Libyan Dawn coalition towards increased violence and extremism, as was already shown by the air strikes conducted against the city of Zintan on February 17th. This could have a direct impact on the security and humanitarian situation in the Nafusa Mountains, as well as in the south and in the oil crescent area, with military confrontation being fuelled once again and intensified. In addition, military operations conducted against broadly defined "terrorist" targets may lead to more alliances based on shared short-term interests rather than on ideological proximity.

Overall, increased and more direct involvement by regional and international forces in the Libyan conflict will certainly provide ever-more-fertile ground for jihadists to recruit fighters locally. The rapid expansion of IS in Libya was the

result of a reshaping of the jihadist sphere, with previously al-Qaʿida-aligned groups ready to cooperate and others prepared to exchange one brand name for another with superior militant strength and more resources, even more so if it has been grafted onto profitable criminal enterprises and resource predation. Now Islamist and other revolutionary armed groups might in some cases be pushed into some form of alliance with the jihadists should foreign forces intervene, especially if this is perceived as foreign countries picking sides and supporting the rival coalition led by Haftar and the Tobruk government.

Secondly, such Western engagement would deprive the UN-led mediation process between the rival factions of any chance of succeeding or arriving at a political agreement on priority issues such as the formation of a government of national unity and the implementation of a comprehensive ceasefire. So far, even though the pace of the process has been slow, encouraging progress was made during the three rounds of talks held in Geneva in January and in the Libyan city of Ghadames in February. In early February representatives of the reinstituted GNC who had previously boycotted the UN-brokered dialogue participated for the first time in a meeting convened by UN Special Representative Bernardino León and agreed to all the points previously decided by the other delegates in Geneva. Representatives of municipal and local councils from a number of towns and cities across Libya also joined in, notably resulting in the conclusion of an agreement between the municipal councils of Misrata and Tawergha.[1]

In the wake of the bombings in al-Quba on February 20th, the UN-led mediation has become more complicated, with the HoR voting to suspend its participation in dialogue meetings on February 23rd. Yet international efforts to restore communication and build confidence between the opposing parties in order to find a way out of the current institutional deadlock must continue, because a political vacuum and the absence of an authority with wide legitimacy and actual control on the ground will only favour further expansion of the jihadist presence in the country. So far, the approach of the international community of linking the lifting of the arms embargo to the formation of a government of national unity has been in line with such an analysis.

The need for additional support for political dialogue and local initiatives

International support for the UN-led mediation process should go beyond mostly rhetorical declarations of support by individual countries that may at times also pursue other tracks and objectives, however. In particular, it should be made clear to all the foreign countries involved in the conflict that pushing for military solutions (and providing the means for such solutions to some factions) is unwelcome. While it may prove difficult, if not impossible, to actually prevent individual countries from providing support and arms to one coalition or faction, those who do so should at least not be legitimated or supported in their actions.

The idea currently being explored of deploying foreign troops on the ground to monitor the implementation of a ceasefire might also prove detrimental. While it may trigger hostile reactions from some communities, especially those who suffered the most from the NATO-led intervention of 2011, it would also give credence to the narrative of the jihadist groups and all the forces eager to frame the conflict as a confrontation between Western and "infidel" forces, on the one hand, and defenders of the "right Islam", on the other, and indirectly help them implement their objectives of turning Libya into a new ground for international jihad and recruiting more local and foreign fighters.

In such a context the international community and individual countries willing to contribute to a political solution to the conflict and thereby stop IS expansion should pay more attention to the wider Libyan society and local communities, and to what is happening in their midst. Initiatives stemming from Libyan social activists in particular might contribute to the conclusion of a political settlement between the main political and military factions fighting for power, as well as to the implementation of such a settlement on the ground.

Firstly, these social activists are significant in that they can exert pressure both on domestic political and military leaders and on the international community by sending a message from the wider Libyan society – ordinary citizens and community leaders – that too much blood has already been shed and that the conflict needs to be resolved by peaceful, not military, means.

Secondly – and even more importantly – these social actors can also help to design relevant mechanisms for the implementation of agreements reached by political and military leaders who are party to the dialogue. The actual implementation of any agreement between the rival parties will likely be complicated by both serious contestation on the ground over the legitimacy of the participants as representatives of specific factions, groups or local communities, and by the difficulty faced by those claiming leadership over groups and communities in any attempts on their part to actually control the social, political and military forces that are present in Libyan society, which are very disparate and deeply fragmented.

For this reason, the successful implementation of any agreement will require some degree of coordination between the so-called "leaders" party to the dialogue and local groups and communities on the ground. In particular, reaching a comprehensive and sustainable ceasefire will

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1   For details on the agreement, see the UNSMIL website, <http://unsmil.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?ctl=Details&tabid=3543&mid=6187&ItemID=1994595>.

probably require the participation of local communities both in designing the mechanisms for implementing the agreement reached and actually implementing them. Coordination of this kind, far from being a somewhat artificial promotion of the fashionable concepts of "participation" and "ownership", could actually make the difference on the ground.

During early 2015 the relevance of increased coordination between formal political mediation such as the UN-led initiative and more grassroots-level initiatives was highlighted by a successful experience such as the "societal dialogue" organised by Libyan social activists in Tunis in mid-January.

This meeting, which brought together some 45 representatives of towns and tribes from across Libya, aimed at restoring and facilitating contacts between communities that have been divided by the conflict, as well as exerting pressure on politicians and armed groups for ending violence and entering into serious political dialogue.[2] The meeting contributed to rebuilding trust and channels of communication among key Libyan constituencies. In particular, it was instrumental in facilitating several prisoner exchanges in the Jabal Nafusa region, and helped lay the basis for ongoing dialogue efforts between Misrata and Zintan, as well as Misrata and representatives of eastern tribes.

While these can be seen as positive developments, they are, of course, limited in scope and are insufficient to counterbalance the recent spillover of violence across the country. Initiatives coming from Libyan social activists and local communities cannot constitute a substitute for serious engagement with the main political and military protagonists on the ground, not least because these role-players have the capacity to derail any progress or agreement that does not suit their own interests or priorities.

However, in a situation where the legitimacy of group leaders and community representatives is being continuously questioned and political deadlock has proved extremely conducive to the expansion of jihadist violence, the international community and Western countries concerned about Libya should not only privilege political ways out of the crisis, but should also pay more attention to Libyan social forces and support them in the constructive role they can play. It is by supporting the construction of a consensus of some sort among Libyans, not by deepening divisions, that the IS threat will best be countered. The first step should therefore be political, not military.

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2   The Facebook page of the initiative is available at <https://www.facebook.com/hiwar.mojtame>.

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