OxfordResearchGroup
building bridges for global security

Oxford Research Group Briefing – AUGUST 2015

Libya Between the Sahel-Sahara and the Islamic State crisis
Richard Reeve

Summary

This briefing reviews security developments and international policy towards the Sahel-Sahara region of northwest Africa over the year since ORG published *From New Frontier to New Normal: Counter-Terrorism Operations in the Sahel-Sahara*. It analyses the challenges and opportunities for peace in Libya, the growing international consensus for a 'stabilisation' intervention there, and the conflicting foreign aims and interests that might constrain such a force.

Conflict Dynamics in the Sahel-Sahara

The Sahel-Sahara constitutes a huge geographic area in which there are multiple and interconnected security, economic and political crises whose impacts flow between the densely populated Mediterranean and West African littorals. Five more specific crises may be singled out as the current manifestations or most full-blown symptoms of a larger regional crisis of under-development, autocracy and marginalisation. The dynamics of these crises have changed in important ways during 2015.

1. Conflict in Northern Mali

The conflict in northern Mali between separatist groups (mostly Tuareg and Arab) and the Malian government was finally ended officially through a peace agreement signed by the armed opposition groups in June. This came two-and-a-half years after the French military intervention that reconquered the north for the Malian state and after many months of mediation (some say dictation) by the Algerian government.

In many ways, as discussed in a previous briefing, the Algiers Agreement is a return to northern Mali's pre-2012 status quo ante of de facto localised autonomy under tribal leaders in peripheral Tuareg and Arab regions, including of security and justice provision and control of the smuggling-based economy along the Algerian border. Malian authorities will have a 'normal' presence in most of the north's main towns and Tuareg and Arab elites can expect a slightly higher share of political and economic patronage under Mali's clientelist political system.

More worryingly, the eventual peace agreement was achieved under a high duress for the separatist parties. This was achieved through international threats of sanction or repression if they did not sign, and by the Malian government stoking an intra-northern civil war through arming loyalist ethnic militia there. There are strong indications that the

supporters of the 2012 rebellion against the Malian state rejected the terms of the peace deal. This suggests that the cyclical northern conflict will re-emerge before long, as it did in 1962-1964, 1990-1995, 2007-2009 and 2012-2015.

Meanwhile, much of northern Mali is likely to remain under the security control of the 10,000+ peacekeepers of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission (MINUSMA) and the thousand or so French special forces deployed permanently to bases in Gao and Tessalit as part of France's regional counter-terrorism Opération Barkhane. While this international commitment probably saved Mali from collapse in 2013 and facilitated democratic national elections later that year, their presence and shield actually makes it a lot easier for the Malian government to avoid a genuine political settlement and reconciliation with the north.

MINUSMA is now by far the deadliest posting for UN peacekeepers, who suffered at least 28 casualties last year, mostly ambushed by jihadist groups excluded from the peace process. Attacks on Malian security forces deployed in the north have escalated since the June peace deal, although it is hard to say whether these are by jihadist groups or rejectionist elements of the separatist armed groups.

2. Conflict in Northeast Nigeria

The Boko Haram insurgency in northeast Nigeria has taken on a very different character in 2015 after two years of rapid escalation, territorial gains and internationalisation at the expense of the inept and hollow Nigerian military. In early February, neighbouring Chad entered the fight within Nigeria, at the latter's reluctant invitation. By April, Chadian and Nigerian forces had reclaimed almost all Nigerian territory formally under the jihadist group's control while Cameroon and Niger moved against Boko Haram inside their own territory.

In marked contrast to experience in Iraq and Syria, the Lake Chad Basin regional collaboration demonstrated what neighbouring states can achieve when motivated, with limited external support. France, from its permanent military base in Chad's capital N'Djamena, almost certainly provided intelligence and logistic support, but Boko Haram could make little propaganda value of this intervention. Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger and Benin are now finalising a standing Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to continue operations. Headquartered in N'Djamena, this regional force is also quietly backed by the US and UK, which have small military and intelligence detachments alongside their French peers.

Also of huge significance was the electoral victory of Muhammadu Buhari as Nigerian president in May in the continental superpower's first competitive transfer of power. A northern Muslim and retired general, Buhari has transferred the army command centre to Maiduguri, the northeast's main city, and prioritised boosting the morale, equipment, training and discipline of troops who have often fled rather than fight and targeted civilians.

He has also talked up the possibilities of negotiating with elements of Boko Haram and the need to address the roots of the insurgency in state corruption, impunity and neglect of the northern economy. In response, the US government has indicated that it may exempt Nigeria from the current restrictions on its provision of military assistance and is likely to boost its training programmes and supply reconnaissance aircraft.

None of this means that Boko Haram has been neutralised. While it no longer controls significant territory, the group has regrouped to stage something of a comeback in terrorist attacks and abductions in urban areas since mid-2015, including its first attacks within Chad. Positive political developments within Nigeria and its own brutal treatment of civilians may have curbed support for the group there, but it seems to retain a large and radical membership. As in northern Mali, this has been scattered and displaced rather than destroyed.

Since March, the group has been officially affiliated with the Islamic State, now referring to itself as the Islamic State West African Province. This may indicate that it has revised its strategy away from Nigeria and towards a more regional presence. Since July, firebrand leader Abubakar Shekau has disappeared from the group's propaganda videos and statements, stoking speculation that the group has split or purged itself around the recent setbacks. If so, this could be an opportunity for the political negotiations that have thus far been almost impossible.

3. Conflict in Libya

Libya's post-Gaddafi internal tensions escalated catastrophically in mid-2014, resulting in two rival governments, scores of armed militia groups, massive displacement, dwindling oil revenues, ascendant foreign-backed extremist groups and what is being called the Second Libyan Civil War. While the government based in Tobruk and Beida (eastern Libya) has made some recent gains towards its rivals' power base in Tripoli, the national capital, and the west coast, the military situation is essentially a stalemate between two very shaky alliances.

More positively, peace talks brokered by the UN have been ongoing since January in an effort to end the war and forge a single government of national unity. A rather token political agreement was eventually reached in Skhirat, Morocco in July. This deal has not been accepted by the Tripoli-based General National Congress (GNC) administration, which controls the physical infrastructure of the national government and ministries in the capital. However, the deal is not entirely one-sided. The militarily powerful rulers of Misrata, Libya's third city, have abandoned the GNC to sign the agreement, as have some influential tribal leaders and Islamist parties in western Libya.

The rump of the GNC – which is mainly composed of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated members of the 2012-2014 parliament – is increasingly isolated and under pressure to sign up to the Skhirat Accord. It is continuing talks with the UN envoy to this end. The main sticking point is likely to be the future unification and command of the armed forces and the unresolved future role of General Khalifa Haftar, a US citizen and former Gaddafi ally who commands the Libyan National Army (LNA). Despite its name, the LNA is

essentially a militia allied with, but not necessarily commanded by, the Tobruk-based House of Representatives government.

The GNC might be encouraged to commit to the agreement via the carrot of an expanded role for itself as Libya's second chamber ('State Council') and the stick of targeted sanctions, but it is difficult to envisage the increasingly hardline militia still affiliated with the GNC submitting to merge under Haftar or any other former Gadaffi-era official. Merging the myriad of militia into a meaningful national armed forces will be the hardest part of any peace process.

4. Violent extremism in the Maghreb

Two things that Libya's twin governments have in common are a quest to control Libya's huge oil resources and opposition to the presence of Islamic State in Libya. While the former pits them against each other, the latter gives some hope for mutual interest and action to prevent the complete disintegration of Libya.

A tiny player in the Libyan struggle until the beginning of 2015, the Islamic State has emerged since January as a force capable of controlling territory, including coast facing Italy and Greece, and mounting terrorist and conventional attacks in all parts of the country. Since February, it has controlled most of Sirte, the largest town on the central coast, and a few surrounding towns and villages. It has meanwhile lost control of most of its original base in Derna, a port on the east coast, albeit to a local al-Qaida-affiliated rival.

As in Syria, many of the militia that fought against the state in the first Libyan civil war (2011) were of increasingly Islamist orientation and contemporary Libya exhibits a kaleidoscope of ideological, regional and tribal orientations and international connections. The status of the largest Libyan jihadist group, Ansar al-Shari'a, is unclear. Part of it appears to form the core of the Islamic State faction in Sirte; other factions in eastern Libya may be allied with elements of the GNC administration.

Connections to foreign jihadist groups are similarly conjectural. A mid-June US airstrike near Ajdabiya, a town in eastern Libya where Ansar-aligned militia are strong, reportedly killed both the leader of Ansar's Tunisian sister organisation and Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the leader of al-Mourabitoun, a trans-Saharan jihadist group responsible for many attacks in Mali, Niger and Algeria.

Not surprisingly, Libya's neighbours are deeply uneasy about the ability of such jihadist groups and leaders to operate freely in Libya. The Tunisian government has claimed that the perpetrators of the economically devastating terrorist attacks on tourist targets in Tunis (Bardot Museum, 18 March – 22 killed, mostly Europeans) and Sousse (26 June - 38 killed, mostly British) received training and arms in Libya. Belmokhtar's 2013 attack on Algeria's In-Aménas gas plant was launched from southwest Libya; France and its Sahelian allies fear that the same area is the rear base for attacks by al-Mourabitoun and al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) against Mali and Niger. Egypt worries about

the ability of its own Islamic State in Sinai and Muslim Brotherhood opponents to use lawless Libyan territory, as well as about the safety of its many ex-patriates there.

5. Illegal migration from Libya to the EU

The threat to EU security from Islamic State or al-Qaida outposts on the southern shores of the Mediterranean has been recognised by European states yet internal political issues have greatly muddied the issue of how to respond to Libya's political and security crisis. For the UK government, responding to the killing of 30 citizens in Sousse by a Tunisian loosely affiliated with Islamic State in Libya, the answer seems to be to extend its bombing of Islamic State targets from Iraq to Syria.

For the UK and virtually all other EU states (France is the exception, because of its military and economic interests in the Sahel) the bigger security issue represented by Libya's collapse is the surge in 'irregular' migrants from third countries using the Libyan coast as a launch point to reach Europe by sea. The European impetus to respond to Libya's crisis thus derives more from populist pressures within the Union to limit migration, including asylum claims. Indeed, in much of the European populist media and imagination the desperate asylum seekers and economic migrants landing in Italy and Malta are masking an influx of jihadist terrorists.

Herein lies an often misrepresented tension between the expansion, on the one hand, of jihadist activity in the Sahel-Sahara and, on the other, of the trafficking economy. Figures released by Frontex, the European borders agency, for the first half of 2015 suggest that the number of migrants making the crossing from Libya or Tunisia towards Italy and Malta is actually lower this year than in 2014, when it surged to over 170,000. The dynamic and tragic factors in 2015 are the higher numbers drowning while making this Central Mediterranean crossing and the massive increase in migrants (mainly Syrians and Afghans) entering the EU from the east, via Turkey and the Western Balkans.
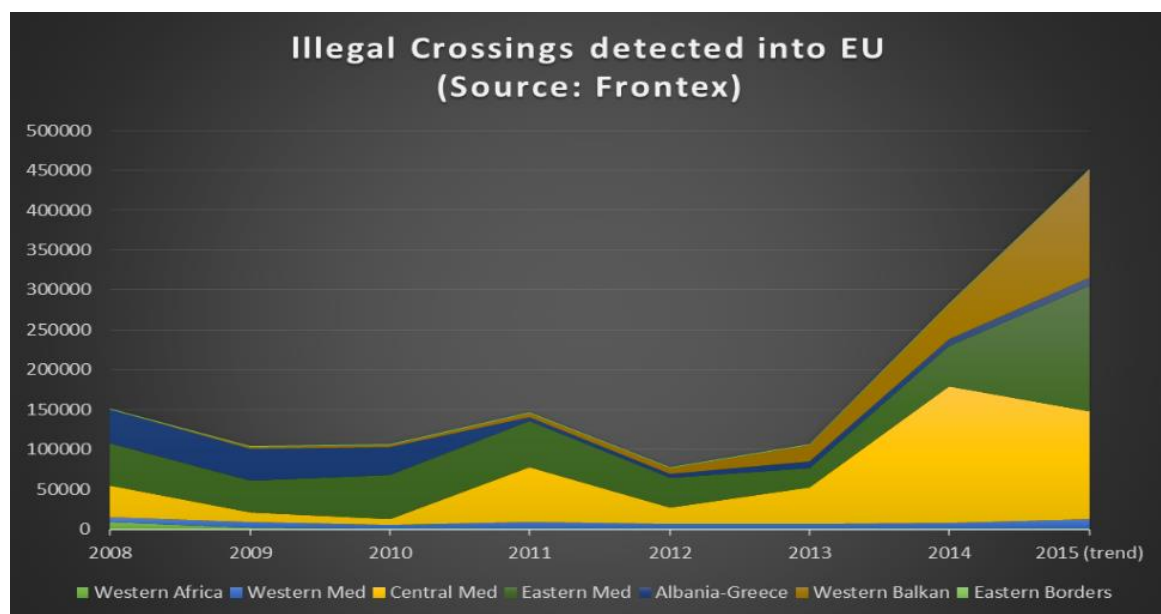
The most likely explanation for the dip in irregular migration through Libya in 2012 is the perceived lawlessness of Libya during and after its 2011 civil war and the seizure of northern Mali, an important stage on the trans-Saharan migration route, by AQIM and allied jihadist groups in 2012. This raises an interesting question of whether one of the unintended consequences of the French and UN 'stabilisation' forces in the southern Sahel-Sahara has been to secure and encourage the safe passage of migrants from West Africa to the Libyan coast. A second question, occasioned by the slight reduction in the Central Mediterranean migrant flow since 2014, is whether renewed war in Libya and the presence of Islamic State militants specifically targeting foreign Christians (e.g. Egyptian, Ethiopian, Filipino) has disinclined migrants to pass through Libya.

Interventionist Dynamics

As documented in a [major report](#) by ORG a year ago, the Sahel-Sahara has become a significant focus of external counter-terrorism operations since at least 2012. Opération Barkhane has seen over 3,000 French forces establish or entrench permanent positions in five Sahelian countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger). The US is constructing a dedicated base for drones in northern Niger, support services for special forces operations and a network of onshore and offshore facilities for airborne Marines rapid response teams along the coasts of West and North Africa. France, the US, UK, Germany, Canada, Russia, China, Israel and others have become involved in training, equipping and providing intelligence to Nigerian and Chadian security forces. The Netherlands has sent attack helicopters, special forces and intelligence agents to Mali under MINUSMA. The EU has established military training missions in Mali and Niger.

While there have been few major evolutions in the external security presence in the Sahel in 2015, the situation across the Sahara is more dynamic. In late 2014 and early 2015 the pressure for foreign intervention in Libya came mainly from conservative Arab states, notably Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, both of which launched air raids into Libya. Since this spring such pressure has shifted from the Middle East to Europe. Two developments explain this.

The first is the EU's perceived migration crisis. In May EU leaders agreed to seek UN authorisation to launch attacks on people trafficking groups operating from Libya and to destroy their boats. Given Libyan government opposition and more sober voices within the Security Council, it may be wondered whether this was a serious plan or a political posture to be seen to be doing something, however ill thought through, in response to the migration flow. What EU states have actually done, not least the UK, is to bolster their commitments to Frontex's naval force, quietly restoring its capacity to act as a search and rescue force.

The second development is the launch of the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen in late March. As discussed in an [April briefing](#), the focus of the most powerful Arab states (notably Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE) on confronting the perceived expansion of Iranian influence in the Middle East has occasioned significant shifts in

Middle Eastern geopolitics. Most importantly, Saudi Arabia has reconciled with elements of the Muslim Brotherhood and states such as Turkey and Qatar that support them. With their focus increasingly on Yemen and Syria – both likely to be long wars – the potential for a proxy war in Libya between those that support and oppose the Brotherhood is much reduced.

The US remains essentially outside these blocs and has not altered its position on Libya, where it believes it has a right and duty to use special forces or air attack to capture or kill high value terrorists who threaten its interests. The mid-June attack by two F-15E manned aircraft was the first US air strike on Libya since the 2011 campaign to unseat Gaddafi, although US agents have twice abducted alleged terrorists from Libya since 2013. To large extent, US policy to Libya is guided by domestic political pressure for retribution over the killing of the US Ambassador to Tripoli by Ansar al-Shari'a in 2012.

A fourth group of interested states is the Sahel states to Libya's south. With French encouragement, these have lobbied since the beginning of 2015 for a UN-mandated peacekeeping force to pacify Libya. Their interests are to oppose the presence of Islamist groups in Libya, but relate to AQIM and allied factions in the southwest rather than to Islamic State or Ansar in the north. The spread of the Boko Haram insurgency has distracted from Libya while refocusing African concern on the activity of jihadist groups.

Conclusion: Towards a new Libyan intervention

What this means for Libya is that in the second half of 2015 there is increasing international consensus (Arab, EU, US, African) on the need for an inclusive political settlement between Libya's rival elites, for the need to avoid another proxy war, and for some form of international stabilisation force to protect state institutions, police its frontiers and help merge and retrain its fragmented 'security' forces.

According to undisclosed sources cited by *The Times* in early August, a plan has been drafted by the US and key EU states (France, the UK, Italy, Germany and Spain) for a UN-mandated stabilisation mission to be sent to Libya as soon as the GNC signs up to the Skhirat Agreement. This would seem to have the support of the internationally recognised Tobruk-based government, although not yet of course by the GNC and its armed allies.

A number of stumbling blocks are immediately apparent for such an international force to be successful in stabilising Libya:

First, the Skhirat Agreement is not yet an inclusive political agreement. It needs to be more open to addressing the concerns of GNC parties in order to avoid being seen as a diktat from Western and conservative Arab states to exclude Islamist parties from power. The current isolation of the GNC may be problematic in this regard.

Second, the thorny issue of security sector reform and the future composition and command of the armed forces is largely unresolved by Skhirat and needs to provide real incentives and guarantees to secure the demobilisation of the many militia competing since 2011. The future role of General Haftar, widely viewed by Libyans as a US or Egyptian puppet, may be particularly divisive.

Third, the various external parties backing an intervention force need to be very clear on what its goals and strategy are. It may not be easy to reconcile the Italian imperative for a standing force to combat illegal migration with the US and French imperative for a mandate to wage war against jihadist groups in Libya.

Fourth, Libya is a vast territory three times the size of France. Deploying and sustaining any peacekeeping force over such distances will be hugely challenging and expensive. As in northern Mali or Afghanistan, spreading peacekeepers thinly over such terrain will expose them to high risk of attack and, potentially, mission failure.

Fifth, rebuilding the Libyan state will take far more than establishing a military presence on the ground or air strikes against 'spoilers' or 'terrorists'. Providing support to reconstructing political, bureaucratic, security and economic institutions requires a major commitment of time and financial resources to be successful.

Thus, while Libya is potentially at a turning point that could help resurrect a functional, fair and representative state, it is by no means clear yet how an international 'stabilisation' force will help to deliver this, rather than the short-term political deliverables that the US, EU and Arab states demand. A successful response demands an honest appraisal of the shortcomings of Western and Arab interventions in, inter alia, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, not to mention Libya.

Above all, success will require a commitment to staying the course and entail major costs in terms of money and, in all probability, lives. As the Scottish National Party recently pointed out, the UK government spent 13 times more bombing Libya in 2011 than in putting it back together subsequently. Libyan peace and stability is unlikely to be achieved without a commitment to reverse this equation and commit resources to long-term state-building and reconciliation.

About the Author

*Richard Reeve is Director of the Sustainable Security Programme at Oxford Research Group (ORG). These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please **consider making a donation to ORG**, if you are able to do so.*