



BULLETIN

No. 21 (871), 10 March 2016 © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski (PISM Director) • Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)
Jarosław Cwiek-Karpowicz • Anna Maria Dyrer • Dariusz Kałan • Patryk Kugiel
Zuzanna Nowak • Sebastian Płóciennik • Patrycja Sasnal • Marcin Terlikowski

The Crisis in Libya and the Rise of Jihadism and Migration

Alicja Minda, Patrycja Sasnal

Five years after the downfall of Muammar Qaddafi in 2011, Libya is the second most-destabilised Arab state after Syria, with multiple local centres of power, some 2,000 militias in intertwined conflict, a growing people-smuggling market and expanding terrorist organisations, namely Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State. Located just 450 km from Europe's shores, Libya may this year become the new centre of operations for jihadist movements, elevating the terrorist threat to Europe, as well as a major migration route should the process of forming a national unity government under the auspices of the UN fail and the Eastern Mediterranean route via Turkey and Greece be shut down.

Current Political Landscape. Five years after the uprising against Muammar Qaddafi in 2011, Libya is on the verge of becoming a failed state as defined by the 2015 Fragile States Index. However, efforts aimed at forming a national unity government launched in 2014 by UN Special Representative Martin Kobler have resulted in the signing of a political agreement between the major stakeholders in December 2015 and a proposal for a cabinet line-up on 15 February, now awaiting approval of the internationally recognised parliament. Apart from the overarching goal of bringing together the two competing power centres of Tobruk and Tripoli, one of the new government's main tasks will be to specify the role of the supreme commander of the armed forces and create a unified Libyan army. Since Qaddafi's ouster, the country has been controlled by nearly 2,000 local and regional militias. The agreement provides for their disarmament and disbandment or integration into the army, as well as for combatting terrorist organisations such as Islamic State (IS), Ansar Al Sharia and Al-Qaeda. Legislative power is to remain with the internationally recognised House of Representatives (HoR), formed in the June 2014 elections and which presently controls mostly the northeastern parts of the country (Tobruk, Ajdabiya and others) and Zintan in the northwest. HoR competes for power with the Tripoli-based General National Congress (Al Mutamar Al Watani Al Aam, or the GNC). It is supported by an alliance of Islamist militias called Libya Dawn and branches of the Libya Shield grouping, together controlling most of the northwestern part of the country (Tripoli, Misrata and others). HoR, in turn, enjoys the military backing of the Gen. Khalifa Haftar-led Libyan National Army (LNA), which is fighting the Islamists from Libya Dawn and Libya Shield.

Terrorism and Jihadism. The fall of Qaddafi has allowed many armed and jihadist groups to thrive. Even before 2011, Libyans constituted one of the most-represented nationalities of fighters in Iraq. After the Libyan revolution, they joined rebel groups fighting in Syria, where they came in contact with IS. At present, a large part of the Libyan coast is held by various Islamist terrorist organisations. Control over Benghazi and its suburbs is currently being wrenched from Ansar Al Sharia (ASL) by the LNA, while the Derna area serves as a base for various Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) splinters affiliated with Al-Qaeda. ASL is also said to be present in the western port of Zuwara, one of the main migrant smuggling hubs, and to control a nearby oil and gas plant in Mellitah, where a pipeline to Italy originates.

The oil-rich Gulf of Sidra has seen the growing presence of IS since the beginning of 2015. After taking control in June 2015 of Sirte, together with an airport and a power plant, IS has been pushing out in both directions along the coast and now holds sway over about a 200-kilometre belt. In January and February 2016, IS launched attacks on nearby oil terminals in Sidra and Ras Lanuf as well as on the port of Misrata, most likely with a view to gaining control over chief transport routes connecting the western and central parts of the country. Territorial expansion efforts are also directed south, towards the oil fields of Mabrouk and the intersecting smuggling routes. It is expected that as the situation in Syria and Iraq becomes

tougher for IS, its command will gradually increase its presence in Libya and may eventually shift its strategic assets there. In some propaganda materials, future recruits are currently being instructed to head to Libya rather than Syria or Iraq, and according to American intelligence sources, more recruits are already streaming into Libya than into Syria. That IS may be planning to build a permanent base in the country can also be inferred from the fact that it is trying to attract media experts and engineers, offering them high salaries. The number of IS fighters in Libya is currently estimated at 5,000 to 6,500 and 70–80% of them are foreign nationals, mainly from Tunisia but also from Chad, Mali and Sudan.

People Smuggling and the Migration Crisis. The ongoing political crisis in Libya has a strong impact on migration trends to Europe. From 2009 to 2011, the borders were tight as a result of a bilateral agreement between Tripoli and Rome, but since the Libyan revolution the conditions have been ripe for illegal migration to flourish (although Libyans themselves are not fleeing). The lack of centralised power has allowed for the creation of multi-tier, highly organised smuggling networks.

The country lies on the so-called Central Mediterranean migration route, which is currently the second biggest contributor to migration flows to the EU. In 2015, some 150,000 people arrived to Italy via that route, mostly from Western Africa or the Horn of Africa. Another 9,000 came in the first two months of 2016. People smuggling is so lucrative that gangs actively recruit or even force African migrants onto boats. The Central Mediterranean route cuts across the western part of Libya via Sabha and “collects” migrants coming from Mali, Nigeria or Niger, and its various stretches are controlled by various smuggling groups. The East African route, used by migrants from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and elsewhere, runs across eastern Libya. Both the Central Mediterranean and East Africa routes meet in the coastal cities, where perilous sea crossings to Italy’s Lampedusa and Sicily or to Malta are arranged. The cost of such a crossing for an adult is \$800–1,000. Smugglers’ networks in Libya are complex structures and involve a significant part of Libyan society. On the top level, they are controlled by Libyan nationals, often current or former military or police officers. At the level lower are the actual people smugglers or middlemen, also usually Libyans, who organise accommodations and the journey itself. The smugglers, in turn, have helpers, usually of the same nationality as the prospective migrants and whose job it is to recruit clients and act as interpreters. This lowest-level role is often played by African economic migrants. Terrorist organisations take advantage of the situation. Al-Qaeda was involved in smuggling people, drugs and weapons even during the late regime, operating mainly in Libya’s southern deserts in cooperation with the Touareg and Toubou tribes. The current possibility of unrestrained movement has enabled Al-Qaeda to forge stronger links with its Benghazi and Derna affiliates. Many groups, including the terrorist group Al-Mourabitoun, led by Algerian Mokhtar Belmokhtar, move freely across the borders and are active not only in Libya but also in Mali, Niger, Chad and Algeria. IS appeared on the scene relatively recently and is not directly involved in smuggling but also benefits from it by taxing gangs operating on territories it controls.

Conclusions for the EU. Further destabilisation of Libya will negatively affect not only the EU states with traditional ties to the country, such as Italy, but also the level of security in states that are not Libya’s direct neighbours, such as Poland, as well as dent the strength and unity of the EU as a whole. The scale of political and military power fragmentation, the migration routes criss-crossing the country and the resulting people-smuggling market, from which all sides of the conflict, including Libyans, seem to benefit, make the failure of the current political process a possibility that would further strengthen the jihadists, intensify terrorism threats, and boost migration to the EU.

It is rather unlikely that the would-be government of national unity can gain control and maintain it over the whole country. The process may be blocked by parliamentary factions looking back to Libya’s brief federalist history, opposing a strong central government. Political disputes are taking place against a background of traditional, tribal regionalism previously held in check by Qaddafi. It is in the EU’s interest for the UN-backed political process to be as inclusive as possible and to avoid tipping the scales in favour of the Tobruk camp in order not to polarise the various Islamist factions in the west. While offering strong support for the new central government, the EU must particularly refrain from backing divisive figures such as Gen. Haftar.

Profits from migrant smuggling are an additional factor discouraging the parties from changing the status quo. Groups benefitting from this illegal activity will probably try to translate their clout into political influence, actively sabotaging the peace process or demanding protection in exchange for political support for the new authorities. Moreover, if migration along the Eastern Mediterranean route becomes harder, traffic via Libya could intensify, boosting the smugglers even further. In a scenario in which the national unity government collapses, the most important objective for the EU will be to not allow Libya’s coastline (and its oil infrastructure) to be taken over by jihadist groups, with which there is no negotiation room. If the situation in Libya continues to deteriorate, a naval or air-based military intervention by the EU, selected Member States or NATO cannot be ruled out; the decisive factor should be the scale of the threat to Europe. Special operations are already conducted by France, the UK and the U.S.

At the same time, IS should not be treated as just another terrorist group, of which there are many in Libya. This is, first, because IS in Libya is probably responsible for training terrorists that are later sent to Europe, and second, it holds the biggest appeal for potential new members. Actions against Islamists from weaker groups may stimulate flows to IS even further. For now, the organisation is at the stage of building structures and conquering ever newer territories in Libya. Its goal, as in Syria and Iraq, is to take control of some oil resources and, subsequently, thanks to its domination of the coastline, to manage migration flows from Libya to Europe. Paradoxically, as long as other Islamist and terrorist organisations in Libya that compete with IS remain strong, the latter will not be able to grow as fast. If, however, the new Libyan authorities focus on combatting a few select Islamist groups but not IS, the latter’s ranks will swell.