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Intervention in Libya: Why Here? Why Now? What Next?

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Summary

Five years on from the NATO-led intervention that helped to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi, pressure is growing for a new foreign military intervention in Libya. This time the objective is to destroy the incipient Libyan branch of the Islamic State (IS), which has established dominion over a large, and largely empty, swathe of Libya's central coast since early 2015. This, then, is the latest front of the rebooted War on Terror Lite against IS and likely to be a dominant international issue in 2016.

This briefing analyses some of the drivers and likely consequences of such a confrontation, looking at the motives of IS in Libya as well as those of its various adversaries there. It argues that, while it would not be difficult to displace IS from central Libya, such attacks risk rallying many more Libyans to IS, shifting militants to other parts of Libya or the Sahel-Sahara, and would probably exacerbate the existing conflict between armed factions for control of the Libyan state and its resources. As in Syria, it does not answer the question of who would hold and govern any territory regained from IS.

Although it is important to prevent the further expansion of IS in Libya, getting the politics right is central to generating the Libyan capacity, willingness and legitimacy to confront IS effectively and sustainably. Current international efforts to promote reconciliation between Libya's two rival parliaments as a means to legitimise foreign intervention is misguided in at least three ways. First, it targets political actors who themselves have little legitimacy among ordinary citizens or influence over armed groups. Second, it is disingenuous in its approach, heavily favouring the eastern parliament over the variably Islamist Tripoli-based administration. Third, the pace of reconciliation has been set by external needs to confront IS and the (separate) issue of people trafficking to Europe.

A bottom-up process that reflects the fragmented nature of actual power and legitimacy, political and military, is necessary to deal with IS as part of a solution to, rather than an exacerbation of, the wider Libyan crisis.

The Meaning of Libya to IS

So what is the importance of Libya for IS and its global strategy? This can be looked at in two ways: in relation to IS' original strategy of holding and expanding territory as a clear manifestation of a contemporary Caliphate, and in relation to IS' revised post-2015 strategy of provoking confrontation with the Western world.

Central Libya has been described as the second most important territory for IS after its central territory across eastern Syria and northwest Iraq. Viewed on a map, its 250km swathe of the Libyan coastline looks impressive: an area the size of Belgium or Denmark under the black flag. Yet there are certainly less than 100,000 inhabitants still in this desert strip, almost all of them in the isolated city of Sirte. It has mounted attacks more widely and has some presence around the cities of Derna and Benghazi in eastern Libya and Sabratha, near the Tunisian border, but no real territorial control beyond Sirte district. Were IS to break out of Sirte district to take Misrata (Libya's third city, 100 km northwest) or the oil terminals of Ras Lanuf (50 km east), the situation might look very different.

Libya has to be seen as a pragmatic target for IS territorial expansion, responding to the power vacuum and conflict there, a conflict, lest we forget, not of IS' making. Whereas Mesopotamia is central to the recreation of the original Caliphate and, in some interpretations, fulfilment of apocalyptic Quranic prophecy, as well as a cradle of Arab civilisation and nationalism, the Libyan Desert rings hollow with lack of cultural resonance. It is a sort of non-space between Maghreb and Nile, explaining partly why Gaddafi was so distained by other Arab leaders.

Nevertheless, territorial control in Libya gives IS some important options. One is to physically relocate leaders from Raqqa or Mosul should the core territory be lost to Iraqi, Syrian or coalition forces. A few IS commanders, notably Abu Nabil (killed by a US airstrike on Derna in November 2015), are known to have relocated to Libya. However, the idea of the IS Caliphate within the core lands of the original Caliphates is deeply entrenched among IS' Iraqi and Syrian leadership. It is difficult to imagine the idea or appeal of the Islamic State (this appellation is hugely significant) being so strong without this historical continuity.

More important is the access to resources that controlling a Libyan territory provides. Such resources include weapons, very easily available since the looting of Gaddafi's arsenals in 2011, and cash, through taxation, extortion and trafficking. Although Libya is far richer in oil and gas than Syria, it is by no means assured that IS could sell on such resources because the scale of infrastructure in Libya is so much more sophisticated and easily subject to maritime blockade. IS attacks on oil facilities in Libya are likely aimed at extortion of oil companies and at disrupting the flow of resources to its local adversaries paid through the Libya treasury.

A greater resource for IS is recruitment. This has become significantly more difficult for IS in Syria since Turkey got tougher on controlling its borders in 2015. Until very recently, Libya has been a much easier destination for travellers from North or West Africa. Estimates of IS combatants in Libya range from 2,000 to 10,000, most of them foreigners (especially Tunisians, Moroccans, Sudanese, West Africans) and many of them untrained. Proximity to Tunisia is particularly important given the high numbers of youth from that country attracted to jihadi groups.

Tunisia is also central to the meaning of Libya to IS in the context of its revised post-2015 strategy. IS has exploited the chaos of Libya to plan and train for attacks on Western citizens and targets in Tunisia. This serves a dual purpose. First, Tunisia's relatively open environment has presented easy Western targets, notably in the Bardo Museum and Sousse beach resort attacks on tourists. Second, such attacks have largely killed Tunisia's vital tourism industry and severely curtail the economic feel-good factor on which the success of Tunisia's fragile democracy depends. Demonstrating that the Arab Spring was a dead end, false promise is crucial to IS strategy.

IS expansion in Libya may also be motivated by a desire to goad Egypt, the embodiment of the renewed Arab Winter, into an unpopular intervention that over-stretches its military (already active in wars in Sinai and Yemen) and precipitates a nationalist or Islamist response from Libyan groups rallying to IS. Thus IS has targeted Egyptian Christians for filmed executions in Libya. This looks rather different than such goading of Western intervention in the Levant, where the emotional resonance of 'Crusaderism' is much stronger.

In summary, for IS Libya is expendable in a way that Syria and Iraq are not. It is useful for accessing weaponry and foreign fighters, though probably not for raising large cash sums. Libya is already broken and it provides an easy territory to destabilise Tunisia and to goad Egypt into joining the West, Israel, Shi'a Iran and Iraq and the Gulf autocracies in attacking it. Unlike the Levant, IS may not seek to defend its share of Libya far less control more of it.

Intervention Forces: Agreeing to Disagree

In talking of future military interventions in Libya, it is important to acknowledge that a wide range of foreign actors already engage in military actions there, including air strikes and boots on the ground. US, British and French special operations forces are operating covertly with local allies across northern Libya and their aircraft fly quite openly on reconnaissance missions in Libyan airspace. US F-15E strike aircraft, operating from the UK, have launched 'targeted killing' attacks on alleged jihadist leaders and US commandos have abducted at least two others for trial in the US. In February Italy approved the use by US armed drones of its Sigonella air base in eastern Sicily, albeit with tight restrictions. Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have launched their own air raids on behalf of Libyan proxies, while Turkey, Qatar and Sudan are alleged to have supported militia in western and southern Libya.

This range of actors differ markedly on their objectives for Libya in the short-term. For Italy and, to a lesser extent, other European states, the primary threat posed by Libya is as a jumping-off point for tens of thousands of African and Middle Eastern migrants seeking work or refuge in the European Union. In October 2015 the EU launched its Italian-commanded [EUNAVFOR MED](#) naval force with a ludicrous mission and no UN mandate to interdict smugglers off Libya, almost all of whom leave from around Tripoli, some 300 km to the northwest of IS territory. The former colonial power in Libya, Italy has gone rather quiet on its own lead role in an onshore peacekeeping force since IS became entrenched there a year ago.

France and the UK have a greater stake in the war against IS, having suffered dozens of civilian casualties in IS attacks in Paris and Tunisia, respectively, and being strongly involved in the air wars in Iraq and Syria. France has argued for a UN-mandated intervention in Libya since even before the rise of IS there, citing the lawlessness of southwest Libya and its use as a haven by al-Qaida-linked groups that France has fought in northern Mali and Niger since 2013. It has already established special forces bases just south of Libya in Madama, northern Niger and Zouar, Chad, and revived its air base at the Chadian oasis of Faya-Largeau. France is familiar with the Libya-Chad border, having supported Chadian forces in their 1980s war with Libya. The UK and France jointly occupied and governed Libya from 1943 to its independence in 1951.

The US has an additional interest in Libya, beyond its war on IS. Its Ambassador to Libya was murdered with other diplomats in its Benghazi consulate in September 2012. Failure to protect the consulate against jihadist groups (which predate IS but may have since

rallied to it) was a major Congressional issue last year and has been used to batter President Obama and his then Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton. With Clinton the Democratic frontrunner to succeed Obama, and the president looking increasingly weak on Syria, a decisive attack on IS in Libya may look more attractive to Washington. US aircraft have launched at least three attacks on IS and al-Qaida leaders in Libya since June last year. A new US drone base under construction at Agadez in northern Niger appears to be aimed at surveillance of southwest Libya. Until evicted by Gaddafi in 1970, the US Air Force operated a vast air base outside Tripoli.

Egypt shares the Western states' fear of IS expansion in central Libya but has a more pressing concern about the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood political movement in Tripoli, Misrata and Benghazi. Some in eastern Libya see Egypt as having territorial designs on their oil fields and territory, recalling a border war in 1977. Cairo's financial backer, the UAE, shares its violent opposition to Islamist political forces in Libya and sent its aircraft in August 2014 to support its allies in a battle for control of Tripoli airport. This backfired and loosely Islamist parties and militia have controlled the capital since then. The UAE has been far more occupied with its war in Yemen since March 2015.

All these states have backed the House of Representatives government based in Tobruk and Beida in eastern Libya against the Tripoli-based General National Congress (GNC) and allied militia from Misrata and other western coastal towns. In turn, the GNC has been supported by those states favourable to the Muslim Brotherhood movement, notably Turkey, Qatar and Sudan. However, it is unclear how interested these states are in pursuing a proxy war in Libya. Turkey is deeply preoccupied with the war in Syria and its tensions with Russia. Qatar has realigned with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, being persuaded that Iran and IS are bigger opponents. Sudan has made a more seismic shift from the orbit of both Iran and the Brotherhood to becoming a pillar of the Saudi-led war in Yemen. Neither Iran nor Russia, which have confounded Western or Saudi strategy elsewhere in the Middle East, have any particular interest in Libyan politics. In effect, the world has agreed to disagree on who governs Libya while agreeing that someone needs to govern it lest everything collapses and IS grows more powerful.

On the one hand, this takes some of the heat out of the proxy war. Egypt is now perhaps the only state that really cares about the composition of Libya's government. On the other hand, it has skewed the balance of forces firmly towards the eastern-based administration and its military commander General Khalifa Haftar. A former Gaddafi ally, US citizen, putschist against the GNC, and presumed Egyptian cipher, Haftar is a hugely polarising figure in Libya. Central to the eastern administration's war effort ('Operation Dignity') against loosely Islamist armed groups, his domination of the Tobruk-aligned Libyan National Army (LNA) is the chief reason that eastern and western politicians cannot agree to compromise on power-sharing.

Viewed another way, the contemporary phenomenon of IS in the central Libyan desert might be seen to suit virtually all parties. For rival Libyan militia, not least the LNA, it raises their profile among foreign states willing to arm them or promote their claims to power. For Western states, it provides the best reason for warring Libyan factions to come together in national unity. For Egypt, and perhaps some other Arab and Western states, it provides an excuse to support Haftar in clobbering more moderate Islamist groups. That has been very good for the French and Russian arms industries. For European states, it may serve as a deterrent to illegal migrants crossing Libya to seek passage to the EU. Given the current slump in energy prices, even the US, French, Italian, UK, Dutch, Canadian, German, Spanish, Austrian and Russian energy companies that

operate in Libya might seize an opportunity to suspend production there.

Intervention Dilemmas

Should the opportunity arise, Libya may also prove a convenient scale theatre for Western states to prove their muscle in claiming an easy victory over IS. But to do so effectively any would be intervener would need to answer a number of inconvenient questions of the type that have confounded previous operations of the War on Terror. The first question is: do you have a legal mandate to intervene in Libya? Thus far, the answer must be no, although the US and UK governments, supported by Italy and France, have been clear that they do not believe they require an international mandate to pursue 'defensive' attacks on groups anywhere in the world that plot attacks on their citizens or territory. The December 2015 UN Security Council Resolution 2259 hints at future authorisation by calling "upon all Member States to respond urgently to requests for assistance from the Government of National Accord for the implementation of the Libyan Political Agreement". But such a Libyan government is currently stillborn and unable to make such a request with any credibility.

The second questions is: are you clear who your allies are? The question that has dogged Western policy in the Syrian civil war can equally be posed of Libya's civil war. Which ground forces would complement Western or Arab air power in dislodging IS is hugely important. No foreign power seems to be willing to put boots on the ground, and there are certainly plenty of Libyan militia opposed to IS who might do the job. But the nature of militia power in Libya is local, tribal and fragmented. For any militia to expend its energies on fighting IS in Sirte would be to expose it to attack on its home territory. Most likely to cooperate might be Haftar, but this would make a major war between his LNA and the Misrata militias, the two most powerful military blocs in the country, far more likely. Misrata militia control the territory immediately northwest of Sirte district.

The third question relates to unintended consequences: are you sure your action will not rally the host nation to your adversary? From US drone strikes in Yemen and Pakistan to Ethiopia's 2006 invasion of Somalia, military intervention and occupation by rival powers has huge potential to rally locals to nationalist or radical armed groups. Beyond IS' narrative of defending pure Islam against crusaderism and apostasy, most of the potential coalition against IS in Libya, from Egypt to Italy, the UK, France and US, is easily depicted as having neo-colonial ambitions on Libya. Allying with one faction, such as the LNA and/or a weak transitional government, in a complex civil war would also risk driving the moderate Islamist militias of Misrata and western Libya, not to mention other more radical factions like Ansar al-Shari'a, into alliance with IS.

There is also the question of who would occupy and govern, or 'stabilise', Sirte if IS were pushed out. It is no coincidence that IS' beachhead in Libya is the heartland of the Gaddafi regime and tribe. As with the remnants of Iraq's Baathist regime, the alienated core of Gaddafi's regime has thrown some of its military and administrative skills behind IS, exploiting animosity to the transitional government amid the ruins of Gaddafi's hometown. Placing another tribe and militia over the locals of Sirte is likely to exacerbate these drivers of rebellion.

The fourth question is similar: what will the consequences be for surrounding territories? Given the open terrain and asymmetric firepower, it seems unlikely that IS would put up a last stand in Sirte. As with al-Qaida affiliates in the Malian Sahara in 2013, it would be far more likely to abandon its gains and head off into the desert. An easy coalition victory

in Sirte might then mean an influx of Jihadists to other Libyan cities, the far south or perhaps back into the Sahel-Sahara or Tunisia.

The fifth question is: do you have a plan and resources to reconstruct what you are about to destroy? The answer in Libya in 2011 was clearly no. Despite a myriad of piecemeal schemes there was no master plan for supporting Libya's reconstruction, reconciliation and political transition, with near inevitable consequences of fall-out between the militia. With Africa's largest oil reserves, Libya has the potential to pay its own way, but those riches raise the stakes in the political-military game and make it far harder to manage personal and regional ambitions.

The sixth question is the political dimension to the above: do you have an exit strategy? In Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan, it is clear that the US and its allies did not get their exit right, rendering tactical victory strategic failure. Another way of phrasing this is, are you willing to be in this for as long as it takes to rebuild Libya? For there will be no quick fix. Europe, at least, may not have a choice to investing long-term in Libya's stability, but it could barely be more distracted from such a commitment than at present.

Ways Forward: Agreeing to Let Libyans (Dis)agree

The Western approach to renewed intervention in Libya is highly dependent on the success of a UN-led process of reconciliation between Libya's two rival parliaments and the formation of a Government of National Accord that will request foreign intervention and combine its own militia forces against IS. Thus far, while the UN process has achieved some success since late 2015 in getting elements of both parliaments to sign up to a Political Agreement, the political reconciliation process has caused as much enmity as cooperation. The Presidency Council is based in exile in Tunis while the two parliaments are increasingly split and unwilling to endorse a new transition plan or government. While the logic of such a process to heal the most blatant split in the Libyan polity seems obvious, it is fatally flawed in that it assumes that the actors involved have power and legitimacy within Libya. In fact, neither the House of Representatives nor the GNC has a clear or current electoral mandate, and the nature of actual power in Libya is fragmented to actors at the local (city, district or tribal) level, at which militia activity is also focused. It also assumes that Libyan politicians feel that the IS threat is sufficiently urgent for them to rush into a political settlement with their more established opponents.

For most, IS is simply not a priority, let alone existential, threat. Forced onward by Western and a few Arab states, the assumption of the political process is that most Libyans will fall in behind a Government of National Accord, and that foreign military support will bolster such a government's authority as in, say, Sierra Leone or Mali. That seems unlikely, not least because of the divisive influence of General Haftar and the effective (and deliberate) marginalisation of more moderate Islamist factions by the political process' international sponsors.

Where reconciliation and peace-making has been effective in Libya is at the local level, focusing on town and tribal authorities who actually command respect, territory and armed forces. There are many local ceasefires, particularly in western Libya, that could form the basis of a wider bottom-up reconciliation and reconstruction endeavour that would have local legitimacy and effectiveness. But allowing Libyans to agree and disagree on process and priorities, as open politics demands, will take time and a refocusing of resources.

International engagement can support such processes but might also usefully be channelled to healing the divisions within the international community on Libya's future. The proxy element to this war is less intense than it was a year ago, but still a significant distraction, not least in taking pressure off the eastern government and LNA to reach a genuine political compromise. While actors as diverse as the US, Italy, Egypt and Turkey may agree on the need to tackle IS in Libya, it would be foolish for them to do so without agreeing on what comes afterwards.

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