



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Libya: The Next Frontier?

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 333, February 29, 2016

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: As Islamic State (IS) continues to suffer reverses in Syria and Iraq, great pressure can and should be brought to bear against it in Libya, where IS dominance has the potential to threaten vital Western interests. Forceful foreign intervention may be required to protect the central Mediterranean from IS encroachment.

Libya is fast becoming the new focal point of the war against the so-called "Islamic State" (IS) and the next frontier in the battle for Mediterranean security and stability.

US and French Special Forces are reported to be engaged in the fighting there, and Italy has decided to allow drone operations against Libya to depart from the Sigonella air base. UN mediator in Libya Martin Kobler, who believes IS should be purged from Libya by a rebuilt Libyan army rather than by external forces, has weighed in with a warning against urging the fragile new "unity" government in that country to endorse a major intervention. These moves – both in support of and in opposition to a broader engagement of IS in Libya – suggest that Libya is now an active issue on the international agenda.

International attention has remained fixed in recent weeks upon the dramatic turn of events in Syria. Russian military intervention is providing Assad's murderous regime with an opportunity to consolidate control and parlay its military advantage into an improved diplomatic position. Concurrently with Assad's gains, the largely Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (with some American support) have – much to the dismay of Turkish leadership – gained ground at the expense of IS forces, placing it under increasingly substantial pressure in both Syria and Iraq. It remains to be seen whether the ceasefire, or

"hudna", brokered by Lavrov and Kerry will take hold. Still, it is clear that the balance of power has changed.

The state of affairs in Syria has a direct bearing on the situation in Libya. Unless great pressure is brought to bear on IS, and soon, it may shift some of its efforts in Libya's direction. This shift could be made manifest in many ways, most significantly in a threat to the safe passage of maritime traffic in the central Mediterranean – a move that would openly endanger vital Western (and possibly Israeli) interests. The British commander of NATO's naval forces, Vice Admiral Clive Johnstone, recently warned that IS might build a maritime arm, based upon its control of Sirte and a stretch of some 100 kilometers of Mediterranean coast around it.

Moreover, the strategic implications of the spread to Libya of the self-declared "caliphate," led by the man who calls himself Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, are not confined to the threat to the Mediterranean at its narrowest point. Libya is essentially a huge arsenal of poorly controlled weapons – a legacy of Qaddafi's days in the Soviet sun – and functions as a supply line to many terror and criminal enterprises.

Libya's location offers IS multiple opportunities to wreak regional havoc. It can be used as a launching pad for efforts to destabilize Egypt, where Islamists strongly resent Sisi's power; Tunisia, in some ways the only Arab country where the present upheaval produced a relatively liberal outcome; and Algeria, where the bitter legacies of the civil war of the 1990s still simmer beneath the surface.

These threats are not merely theoretical. Terror activities identified with IS are already being conducted from training bases in the Sirte enclave and elsewhere. One such base, in Sabratha near the Tunisian border, was the target of a major U.S. airstrike on February 20 that killed 49 people. (Apparently, this includes Noureddine Chouchane, the man who masterminded some of the spectacular terror attacks in Tunisia aimed largely at western tourists, as well as two Serbian hostages).

The identities of some of those killed indicate that this was intended to be a facility in which non-Libyan subversives could prepare for action elsewhere in the Maghreb. The American attack was thus a highly specific operation, as some observers were quick to note, and had more to do with Tunisian concerns than with the Libyan situation per se. Broader considerations may well suggest that intensified operations against IS in Libya are part of the widening war against violent totalitarian Islamism.

The necessity for such a strategic widening is increasingly clear to the key European players in the Mediterranean. Speaking at a conference on Strategic Challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies on February 18, Dr. Bruno Tertrais of the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique in Paris made this point quite forcefully. He said that the imperatives are both strategic and political. Given the centrality of both the terror threat and the refugee issue to current European public discourse and governmental policies, Europe cannot tolerate the emergence and spread of an IS state-within-the-wreckage-of-a-state, just a short distance from European shores.

Italy is equally concerned, and has demonstrated that concern in several ways. The Italian government pushed last year for a UN mandate for European action to disrupt human trafficking from Libya. As noted above, Italy chose – in an unannounced shift of policy, apparently enacted during January 2016 – to authorize the use of the Sigonella air base in Sicily for US drone operations in Libyan skies. Granted, the authorization covers only force protection missions for US Special Forces in Libya (thus constituting, *inter alia*, an indirect confirmation that such forces are there). Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni was quick to explain that the authorization was not meant to indicate support for a military offensive in Libya.

Still, the trend line is unmistakable. Rome has invested considerable political effort into bringing together the rival Libyan "governments" in order to create a semblance of unity in the face of the IS challenge. Prime Minister Matteo Renzi cannot afford, in either strategic or political terms, to allow a replay of the Syrian catastrophe to unfold so close to Italian soil.

The obstacles to intervention are certainly formidable. The Obama administration remains deeply wary of any military venture. Europe is militarily toothless, and NATO is profoundly distracted and divided. The Libyan "government" (which roundly denounced the US strike) remains dysfunctional and has failed so far to secure parliamentary support. Russia will be sensitive to any new Western incursion into Libya – or anywhere else, for that matter. IS may well react to intervention by inflicting painful blows on Western interests and on pro-Western neighbors like Egypt and Tunisia. The risks are high, as would be the cost of mistakes in execution.

On the other hand, the risks of inaction – in other words, the opportunity costs of failing to exploit options that are open now but may not be open for long – may be even higher. As IS suffers reverses in Iraq and Syria, the chance to hasten its collapse, not only in those two countries but in Libya as well, must not be squandered. As conditions in Libya deteriorate (nearly half a

million are already internally displaced), the implications for Europe may become increasingly grave unless the Islamists face powerful counter-forces.

On the positive side of the ledger, there is evidence that in Libya, too, the Islamists are not invincible. Recent advances in the Benghazi area by the Libyan National Army (led by General Haftar, and backed by Egypt and her allies in the regional "game of camps") prove that IS and its local affiliate Ansar al-Shari'ah can be dislodged from their strongholds. (They had already lost Derna to rival forces in 2014).

Decisive action, preferably backed by forceful foreign intervention, is vital in Libya and elsewhere. For the central Mediterranean to be safe, such an intervention may soon become inevitable. As the US hesitates, stakeholders in the central and eastern Mediterranean should intensify their efforts to "inject some spine" into their battle for supremacy with Islamic State.

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