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ASSESSMENT REPORT

ISIL in Libya: a Reason for Expanded Euro- American Intervention?

Policy Analysis Unit | Jun 2016

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Introduction

Intensive dialogue between Washington and Libya's "Government of National Accord" (GNA) led by Fayed Al Sarraj could result in American so-called "military advisers" being stationed across the North African country to aid in the battle against the Islamic State group (also known as ISIL, for the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant). News of these discussions and the plan for American military advisers was confirmed by Gen. Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff. Speaking after a gathering of NATO military chiefs held in Brussels in mid-May, Gen. Dunford also emphasized that his NATO counterparts were eager to participate in any operation in Libya, even if such interventions could ultimately lead to prolonged conflicts¹. The comments by the highest-ranking US military officer signaled a desire by the United States and its European allies for greater and more proactive intervention in the affairs of Libya, which has remained unstable since its 2011 revolution. The statement also served to confirm, yet again, the presence of US and European special forces groups taking part in direct military operations on Libyan soil. These forces provide arms, training and logistical support to Libyan forces loyal to the National Accord Government. This new-found dedication by Western governments seems to come in response to the frustration voiced by US President Barack Obama who, despite a stated and continued support for the ouster of Gaddafi in the Libyan revolution, has suggested that "failing to plan for the day after" was his administration's gravest foreign policy mistake².

Justifications for an Intervention

America and its European allies are driven by their anxiety that ISIL, having suffered huge setbacks on the battlefield in both Syria and Iraq, will aim to transform Libya into an operating base instead. Western observers feel that the Libyan faction of the Islamic State group has already begun to exploit the political, regional and tribal fissures in Libyan society. In doing so, ISIL has benefited from the lack of a strong, centralized authority in Libya; the country is, in other words, an environment conducive to the expansion of ISIL, repeating the playbook from Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

¹ Dan Lamothe, "Who in Libya will the U.S. send weapons to? It's complicated, says a top general," *The Washington Post*, May 17, 2016, accessed on 2/6/2016, at: <http://wapo.st/1VyfskR>

² "Exclusive: President Barack Obama on 'Fox News Sunday'," *Fox News*, April 10, 2016, at: <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2016/04/10/exclusive-president-barack-obama-on-fox-news-sunday/>

A report submitted to the UN Security Council in 2015 suggests both that the ISIL self-appointed Caliph Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi has a large following in Libya, and that ISIL itself is looking to expand its “so-called caliphate”, across North Africa³. The ability of ISIL's Libyan affiliates to capture oil fields in the eastern town of Ajdabiya has served to heighten fears in Western capitals that the group is now consolidating its position financially. According to some estimates, the group can already call on the services of roughly 8,000 loyal fighters in the country, mostly in and around the city of Sirte⁴. The significance of being so heavily concentrated in the former Gaddafi's hometown is that ISIL is able to build on the frustrations of tribal groups who were sidelined by political patronage and largess after 2011.

Beyond the immediate risks for North Africa as a whole if ISIL succeeds in consolidating a foothold in the region, this would give the extremist organization a forward operating base from which it can launch attacks on Europe—at a distance of only several hundred kilometers (in the case of Benghazi, only 300 kilometers)⁵. Continued political instability across Libya, meanwhile, is already creating fears that a refugee crisis spilling over across the Mediterranean could get worse.

The Limits of an Intervention

In effect, any Western combat role in today's Libya will be limited to special forces units from the United States, France, the United Kingdom and Italy. Some French special forces are in fact already active, supporting former military officer and longtime US resident Khalifa Haftar. The extent of any intervention will likely be smaller than the Western military involvement in Iraq, where the US presently stations 5,000 “military advisers” involved in combat operations, in addition to air support provided to Baghdad and the Kurdish regional government. In Syria by contrast, where the US is at the head of a global anti-ISIL military alliance, Washington has only expanded the size of its fighting force from 50 to 300 individuals.

³ Paul Cruickshank, “United Nations warns of ISIS expansion in Libya,” *CNN*, December 2, 2015, accessed on 2/6/2016, at: <http://cnn.it/1NTiPO6>

⁴ Missy Ryan and Sudarsan Raghavan, “Another Western intervention in Libya looms,” *The Washington Post*, April 3, 2016, accessed on 2/6/2016, at: <http://wapo.st/1Pm45eD>

⁵ Rori Donaghy, “Britain is at war in Libya and nobody thought to tell us,” *The Independent*, May 28, 2016, accessed on 2/6/2016, at: <http://ind.pn/1shuY9f>

In Libya today, there are an estimated 50 members of US special forces groups, divided into two fighting units. These fighters, stationed across the cities of Benghazi and Misrata since the end of 2015, are tasked with identifying potential military allies among the plethora of Libyan armed groups who can be relied on in an upcoming battle against ISIL⁶.

While the presence of these groups is evidence of a continued US interest in Libya, their limited size is further evidence that the Obama administration is committed to making sure that its military endeavors are limited to small special forces groups fighting alongside and helping to train Libyan units with the aid of air strikes and drone operations. This limited group has already overseen two massive air strikes on ISIL targets in Libya, the last of which took place in February⁷. The US is already readying itself for a much expanded aerial campaign, with planners in the US Africa Command fast at work identifying scores of targets in preparation for an upcoming NATO bombing campaign. The US is also working to enhance cooperation between its own special forces and those of France, the United Kingdom and Italy. All of these forces are also working on bolstering the National Accord Government led by Sarraj, specifically focusing now on the identification of potential allies and enemies on the ground in Libya⁸.

The US is looking primarily to Libya's former colonial ruler Italy to lead the upcoming international campaign against ISIL and to coordinate the task of selecting and training the Libyan special forces meant to lead the ground offensive against the group⁹. Rome has already undertaken to supply at least 50% of whatever material is deemed necessary for any joint Western campaign against ISIL in Libya. According to Commander David M. Rodriguez, head of Africa Command, this material will be mainly small arms and munitions, which are easily obtainable; but this does not cover the task

⁶ Eric Walsh, "Washington Post: U.S. troops stationed at Libya outposts," *Reuters*, May 12, 2016, accessed on 2/6/2016, at: <http://reut.rs/1VV2zIE>

⁷ Greg Botelho and Barbara Starr, "49 killed in U.S. airstrike targeting terrorists in Libya," CNN, February 20, 2016, accessed on 2/6/2016, at: <http://cnn.it/1QouzML>

⁸ Pamela Engel, "The US is gearing up for another military campaign in Libya," *The Business Insider*, May 13, 2016, accessed on 2/6/2016, at: <http://read.bi/1TQRDFG><http://uk.businessinsider.com/us-special-forces-are-in-libya-to-drum-up-support-against-isis-2016-5>

⁹ Ryan and Raghavan.

of identifying the Libyan groups who are prepared to work with Western countries in defending the Sarraj government¹⁰.

In parallel to these Western military preparations, more than 25 countries and international agencies pledged in a meeting on May 16 to look into requests from the National Accord Government that they be exempted from an international arms embargo, in effect since 2011. Signatories of the final communique from the Ministerial Meeting for Libya Joint Committee included all five members of the UN Security Council as well as representatives of the Arab League, the European Union and the African Union. Speaking after the meeting, US Secretary of State John Kerry reiterated that the Sarraj-led Government of National Accord was the sole, legitimate authority in Libya, and that as such it was imperative that the GNA was capable of freely tackling ISIL¹¹.

What the Vienna ministerial meeting highlights is the dedication of world powers to ensuring that the Sarraj government has both the domestic legitimacy and international support needed to tackle ISIL head on.

Obstacles to Intervention

The primary obstacle to the success of any military campaign led by the US and/or the world community to tackle ISIL is the lack of a domestic Libyan national consensus. Despite wide recognition of and support for the Sarraj government on the world stage, the GNA has yet to win the allegiance and backing of all Libyan political forces. Before it can claim to be the sole government of Libya and a protector of its territorial integrity, the Sarraj-led government will need to face down both ISIL and the forces now loyal to Khalifa Haftar.

Continued infighting between all of Libya's armed groups has thus far prevented the rise of a formidable military force to defeat ISIL; as long as the internationally recognized Libyan government continues to lack a cohesive military force, then the conditions of the Vienna meeting will not have been met and the arms embargo on Libya will not be lifted.

¹⁰ Carla Babb, "Friend or Foe? Doubts Plague US Military in Libya Training," *Voice Of America*, May 18, 2016, accessed on 2/6/2016, at: <http://bit.ly/1R7QTEh>

¹¹ See "Remarks at the Libya Ministerial", US Department of State, Published online on May 16, 2016: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/05/257266.htm>

US officials have criticized a number of Arab countries for their failure to support the Sarraj-led government in Tripoli. Arab support for the Tobruk-based forces loyal to Haftar has, claimed these officials, made the project of unifying Libya and combating ISIL more difficult.

Italian reluctance to take the lead in any military operations has also served to put a brake on US plans to fight ISIL in Libya. Rome has demanded a number of preconditions before it expands its present military involvement in the country, including a Libyan consensus over the GNA which, according to Italy, has the sole right to determine which Libyan military forces are to be trained and equipped to fight ISIL. The Italian government would also prefer to operate with the legitimacy of a UN Security Council Resolution.

The lack of the required military infrastructure could also prove to be a major impediment to US military plans, particularly after Algeria and Tunisia have both denied their air space to American reconnaissance and combat sorties. This could force the US to launch drone attacks against Libyan ISIL targets from bases as far afield as Spain and Italy.

Conclusion

The US and its European allies now appear adamant in their quest to defeat ISIL in Libya. None of these countries can afford to see Libya transformed into a safe haven for fighters associated with the Islamist group in the event of its defeat in Syria and Iraq. Yet even victory in this regard can be short-lived, with experience showing that ISIL cannot be defeated unless the contexts which gave rise to the group are addressed.