



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# Western Military Intervention in Libya: a Matter of Time

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Jan 2016

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## Introduction

Many Libyans and observers of the country are increasingly worried that the expanded military capabilities of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) within the resource-rich North African nation, particularly in oil-producing areas, will become a pretext for Western military intervention. A state of chaos ensued immediately after the 2012 legislative elections, the first to be held in the country following the toppling of former president Muammar Al Qaddafi in 2011. Most analyses of the situation suggest that European powers, such as Italy and France, and to a lesser extent the United Kingdom, will bear the brunt of any Western military intervention in Libya, thus following the same pattern of the NATO campaign that brought down Qaddafi. The possible risks associated with such an intervention are huge, and the repercussions would engulf the entire North Africa region.

## A Promising Start to a Stalled Transition

Within less than a week of the fall of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, the Libyan people joined the growing revolutionary movement, and rebelled against one of the most repressive regimes in the Arab region. Given the favorable regional and global context, including foreign support which materialized once Qaddafi's forces began marching on Benghazi, and their ability to rapidly organize, the Libyan people were able to quickly achieve their aims and topple the Qaddafi regime. The signs immediately post-Qaddafi were promising: once the July 2012 elections to the General National Council (the country's parliament) were out of the way, a cabinet was formed to lead the country through a transitional period to democracy.

A number of combined factors, however, thwarted a successful transition:

- A failure to incorporate the rebels' armed militias into state institutions, including the military and police.
- The embroilment of Libya's political forces in regional and global polarizations.
- The negative fallout of foreign intervention more broadly.
- A growing fear on the part of the revolutionary forces, who failed to form a unified force, that their accomplishments and sacrifices would be appropriated by the political classes.

All of these factors culminated in a “Political Isolation Law” that bans Qaddafi-era officials from holding public office. It was passed in May 2013, following pressure from the armed militias which took part in the revolution. Following a contentious debate about how wide the law should apply, its application became even more punitive, and included persons it should not have incorporated in the first place. Eventually, recriminations and mistrust meant that pro-revolutionary forces lost all power in the country: revolutionary militia feared that politicians would capitalize on their sacrifices, while politicians worried about the violence of the armed groups – with both factions together failing to demonstrate the malleability needed to reach a compromise.

The Political Isolation Law was a watershed moment in this struggle, leading ultimately to a greater sense of solidarity among the political groups who stood to lose from it, and the subsequent disintegration of the political alliance which had previously formed in opposition to Qaddafi. At this point, retired General Khalifa Haftar, a former opponent to Qaddafi previously associated with US efforts to topple the dictator, sought to exploit the situation and announced “Operation Dignity” on February 10, 2014. Haftar capitalized on growing international opposition to the Islamists, and parallel support for counter-revolutionary forces typified by the June 2013 coup in Egypt, to declare his campaign an effort to cleanse Libya of “terrorists”, using his power to crush Islamists in the country. In response to Haftar’s gambit, on July 13, 2014 pro-revolutionary forces launched the “Fajr Libya” (“Libya Dawn”, a military operation to stop Haftar and his forces from advancing west). The anti-Haftar announcement followed UN-mediated general elections in June, which failed to satisfactorily resolve questions of legitimacy, and the rights to representation and govern in Libya.

They had no sooner been elected than deputies of the June 2014 legislature were mired in disputes surrounding the legitimacy of convening Council sessions outside of the capital Tripoli, and without a formal endorsement by the outgoing General Council (elected in 2012). A bloc of parliamentarians widely described as “Liberals” (although this is a misnomer) demanded that the first session of the 2014 Council be held in Tobruk. An opposing group of parliamentarians, centered on the city of Misrata and labelled Islamists (despite not being Islamists in the strict sense of the word), opposed these moves by the Liberals which they deemed to be unconstitutional, and ultimately boycotted the sessions of the Tobruk-based legislature, convening in Tripoli instead. As a result, two parallel parliaments formed, with no consensus on who had the legitimate right to represent the Libyan people. Gradually, this political difference grew into an armed conflict, with two separate legislatures supporting either Haftar’s forces (the

Tobruk legislature) or the opposing rebels of Libya Dawn (the Misrata deputies). This escalation led to the failure of UN mediation efforts, and the resignation of former UN envoy to Libya Tarek Mitri, who had attempted to bring the battling factions together around a Libyan-centered set of goals. He was replaced by Bernardino Leon, a Spanish national who represented other countries' interests.

## ISIL Finds an Inroad to Libya

Several factors coalesced to create a conducive environment for ISIL to prosper: the inability of Libya's dueling political and military factions to achieve national reconciliation and build a strong state capable of exercising its authority across all Libyan territory; public disenchantment with economic stagnation and lack of security; and disunity on the international level which is reflected in the Libyan sphere. ISIL announced its presence in Libya during February 2015, when an armed group which had earlier pledged its loyalty to Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi—the ISIL "Caliph"—broadcast video footage of the execution of 21 Coptic Christian Egyptian nationals who had been working in Libya. It was a shocking and ugly act of sectarian violence in a country in which such a phenomenon was unknown. Condemned worldwide, it also drew attention to the existence of ISIL in Libya, after most observers had believed that the presence of extremists in the country was limited to a few groups in the city of Derna. The same group of ISIL-affiliated militants subsequently seized the city of Sirt, where the citizens had been left disaffected by the toppling of the Qaddafi regime. The town proved to be a refuge for the ISIL militants, with Ahmed Qaddhaf al Dam Al Qaddafi, a cousin of the former leader Muammar Qaddafi, declaring his support for the group from his Egyptian exile<sup>1</sup>.

Given a potential future expulsion of ISIL's leadership from Syria and Iraq, in light of the airstrikes and military campaign, the possibility of ISIL regrouping in Libya – particularly those of North African descent – has been touted recently as an increasingly likely prospect. In many ways, Libya provides an ideal environment for the future of ISIL and other similar groups: vast territories, the lack of a central authority, and the

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<sup>1</sup> See, "Former Official Ahmad Qadhaf Al-Dam: I Support ISIS", available online at Liveleak:

[http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=21c\\_1423483038](http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=21c_1423483038)

presence of large oil wealth, invaluable to ISIL at a time when it is looking for new ways of paying its members and financing its operations.

## Building Public Consensus in Support of Military Intervention

A recent flurry of reports in the Western media have appeared to foreshadow a military intervention in Libya, replaying a pattern familiar from previous such engagements abroad, when public opinion is prepared, and military action justified in advance. Many of these reports rely on sources in the intelligence community or other anonymous informants, and describe vague fears of the spread of ISIL across Libya and its control of oilfields there. By way of examples, a number of reports refer to the expansion of ISIL across the Libyan coast and over the country's oilfields, as well as the group's attacks on the country's largest oil installations, at the Al Sidra and Ras Lanouf ports. Western sources describe how these two installations, if allowed to fall into ISIL's hands, would give the organization an additional US\$ 100 billion in funds, doubling the estimated value of Libyan oil resources which the group is presently believed to control<sup>2</sup>. This estimate appears hyperbolic when one considers that the oil resources in question remain under ground at present. Nonetheless, this idea will remain indispensable in a propaganda effort to win the public over to the idea of war in the North African country; it can be used to argue that whatever crimes ISIL has committed in Syria and Iraq will pale in comparison with what it could achieve once it seizes Libyan oil resources.

An additional weapon in the arsenal of those clamoring for a war on Libya can be found in the emotive topic of mass migration from North Africa: by brandishing the possibility of mass migration from the southern shore of the Mediterranean, proponents of a war on Libya could play on Europeans' heartstrings. So long as those players active on the Libyan political scene fail to overcome their differences and find a compromise, their country will remain fertile ground for terrorists, and could easily become the next staging ground for new waves of migrants landing on European shores – a replay of Syria. This, of course, holds out the implicit threat of additional terrorists hiding amongst the refugees and making their way to targets on the European mainland. In

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<sup>2</sup> See, "Expanding ISIL Influence Makes the West Weary", in *Al Araby Al Jadeed*, found online at (link in Arabic): <http://bit.ly/1RGtbAy>



other words, it is another bogeyman being fleshed out: the prospect of Libya becoming a base for attacks on Western cities, such as the November attacks in Paris and in San Bernardino, California, the following month.

Beyond reports in the media attributed to anonymous sources, Western government officials are now openly brandishing the prospect of ISIL control of Libyan energy resources. The latest individual to voice these worries was European Union Foreign Affairs Commissioner Federica Mogherini. While ruling out the possibility of a full-scale ground invasion by Western armies in Libya, she did not deny the prospect of a military campaign such as the one in Iraq and Syria, involving both aerial bombardment and special forces operations.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever form such military intervention will take, it would need to be justified on legal and political grounds. This explains the immense pressure which Western officials placed on the two Libyan camps to sign the Sukhairat Peace Agreement (in Morocco). Mediated by former UN envoy Bernardino Leon, who passed on the task to his successor Martin Cobler, one of the main planks of the agreement is that the Libyan interlocutors requested foreign assistance in the fight against ISIL. When it became clear that the Western powers which had sponsored the deal would refuse to allow changes to the text of the deal, or to bring in more parties to the negotiating table, each of the two camps—the one led by the Tobruk Parliament and the Haftar-aligned Tripoli legislature—were split into even more camps, further paralyzing Libyan politics.

## Conclusion

At the time of writing, while the exact shape and form of any Western military intervention in Libya remains unclear, its occurrence is merely a matter of time. Meanwhile, the prospects for the success of such a campaign remain limited, but it will remain as one part of a multi-faceted and multilateral conflict. For Libya, such an intervention will spell greater chaos and internal discord, and further destruction. Experience has shown us that combatting terrorism in the midst of such chaos is impossible: without domestic harmony, Libyans, who alone can defeat extremism in their country, will not be able to challenge ISIL. Only if presented with a clear and

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<sup>3</sup> "Migrant crisis: EU plan to strike Libya networks could include ground forces", The Guardian, May 13, 2015: <http://bit.ly/1IAAacn>

preferable alternative will the people of Libya fight the nihilist forces of extremist groups such as ISIL.