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A Destabilizing Libyan Conflict Requires U.S. Engagement

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Following the NATO campaign that helped opposition groups unseat and kill Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi in 2011, armed groups have struggled for control of the chaotic country. Elections and multiple international efforts to broker a political agreement have failed to stabilize Libya. Terrorist groups have proliferated throughout the country, and the spillover is harming American allies on three continents. Libya currently has no realistic prospects for peace: No faction has the power to subdue the others; no faction has demonstrated a commitment to peace; and no grassroots political movement powerful enough to bring about peace exists at present.

In such an environment, the U.S. should focus on:

- Fighting terrorism in Libya;
- Helping regional U.S. allies protect themselves from the spillover effects of the crisis such as refugees, foreign fighters, and illicit goods flowing in and out of Libya;
- Remaining neutral as much as possible among the competing (non-terrorist) Libyan groups not opposed to American interests; and

- Unifying regional states around the goal of working toward a stable and terror-free Libya.

Background: Revolution and Disintegration

When the Arab Spring reached Libya in February 2011, longtime dictator Muammar Qadhafi unleashed his security services to crush the protests. Fearing widespread civilian massacres, the U.N. Security Council in March 2011 authorized member states to protect Libyan civilians.

Led by the U.S., NATO countries and several Arab states began an intervention that broadly interpreted the protection of civilians mandate. The international campaign boosted the rebellion, and in August 2011, opposition forces entered Libya's capital, Tripoli. Two months later, Qadhafi was dead, likely executed by rebels.

Satisfied that it had prevented a civilian massacre, and determined to avoid nation-building, the Obama Administration stepped back from Libya. Chaos followed as the rebellion deteriorated into a struggle among armed factions for state power and resources. Weapons from Qadhafi's looted arsenals spilled into more than 12 countries, badly destabilizing the region.

Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and various Salafist groups repressed under Qadhafi, gained influence, while terrorist groups also proliferated. The so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) established in Libya its most developed franchise outside Iraq and Syria, with as many as 7,500 fighters in the country at its peak.¹ ISIS captured several towns, and tried to seize major oil installations.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4708>

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The Libyan Political and Military Kaleidoscope

The current political and military situation inside Libya is contested and complex, with three competing governments, two competing legislative bodies, two major military forces claiming to be the Libyan National Army,² and an estimated 1,600 militias.³ The three main factions are:

1. In the west, Faiz Sarraj leads the U.N.-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), which is based in Tripoli. The GNA has some allegiance from a powerful association of militias, the Misrata Brigades, which were central in the anti-Qadhafi rebellion and in the coalition that in 2016 pushed—with the help of U.S. airstrikes—ISIS from its Sirte stronghold after months of hard fighting.
2. In the east, General Khalifa Haftar commands a combination of armed groups with varying loyalties in what he calls the Libyan National Army. In 2014, Haftar began an anti-Islamist military campaign that won much of the territory the extremists controlled in the east; in 2016, his forces seized key oil facilities in the lucrative Oil Crescent region. Haftar controls the Tobruk-based House of Representatives established by the internationally brokered Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) signed in December 2015. According to the LPA, the House of Representatives must certify any national government. However, it has refused to do so for the GNA, instead supporting a transitional government based in al-Bayda and led by Abdullah Al-Thinni. Suspicious of Islamists everywhere, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt are Haftar's primary backers.

3. Tripoli also hosts Libya's third aspiring government, known as the Government of National Salvation, headed by Khalifa Gwell. Gwell appears to have little influence, however, and tries to derive authority from the General National Congress (GNC), a Tripoli-based and largely defunct parliament first elected in 2012.⁴

American Priorities

The U.S. needs to be realistic about what it can accomplish in a situation as complex and difficult as the one in Libya. It should pursue achievable goals that protect American interests in Libya and the region. The most prominent of these goals are:

- **Reducing the terror threat.** The violence and instability inside Libya is the sort of environment in which terrorist groups thrive, and which is likely to continue to make the country an attractive destination and easy transit point for foreign fighters. While various forces pushed ISIS from its strongholds, about 5,000 of its fighters are unaccounted for.⁵ Some are now probing for bases of power in the south and trying to build alliances with tribes down there. The al-Qaeda-linked Ansar al-Sharia (Libya) was part of the attack on U.S. installations in Benghazi that killed Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans.
- **Enhancing regional stability.** The governance vacuum in Libya makes it difficult to slow uncontrolled migrant flows into Europe, and allows violent competition for lucrative smuggling routes from which a number of terrorist groups financially benefit. The weapons and materiel gushing out of Libya “markedly reinforced” terrorist groups in Libya's neighbors and other parts of the Sahel,⁶ while significant numbers of foreign

1. Marrakech Security Forum, Marrakech, Morocco, February 10, 2017. However, most other estimates for the number of ISIS fighters in Libya are lower.

2. Saadun Suayah, “The Libyan Quagmire,” *Times of Malta*, May 15, 2017, <https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20170515/opinion/The-Libyan-quagmire.648029> (accessed May 18, 2017).

3. John Moody, “Libya: Trump's Chance to do More Than Tweet,” Fox News, May 16, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2017/05/16/libya-trumps-chance-to-do-more-than-tweet.html> (accessed May 18, 2017).

4. Mary Fitzgerald and Mattia Toaldo, “A Quick Guide to Libya's Main Players,” European Council on Foreign Relations, http://www.ecfr.eu/mena/mapping_libya_conflict (accessed May 18, 2017).

5. Marrakech Security Conference, Marrakech, Morocco, February 11, 2017.

6. United Nations, “Briefing Security Council on Festering Unrest in Libya, Top Envoy Urges ‘Libyan-Libyan’ Dialogue Anchored in Mutual Trust,” SC/11807, March 4, 2015, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11807.doc.htm> (accessed May 18, 2017).

fighters migrated to Libya to join the fighting. The terrorists who attacked tourist destinations in Tunisia in March and June 2015 trained at an ISIS camp in Libya, while Ansar al-Sharia (Libya) trained 12 of the terrorists who killed 40 people during a 2013 attack in Algeria.⁷

- **Checking malign actors' influence.** Russia has inserted itself into the situation by flying General Haftar out to its aircraft carrier and reportedly making him a number of lofty promises. Representatives of the Misrata Brigades visited Russia in April this year for talks with Russian officials, and Russia's state-controlled Rosneft oil company signed a deal in February 2017 to help Libya redevelop its lucrative oil fields. The Russian government has accomplished most of its critical goals for the Middle East through its activities in Syria and so likely does not need to invest heavily in Libya. However, unless the U.S. strongly engages on Libya, the country will remain a low-risk and inexpensive way for Russia to increase its influence in the region and gain further leverage over Europe and the U.S.

U.S. Must Lead

To best pursue its goals in Libya, the U.S. should:

- **Avoid trying to pick a winner.** The situation in Libya is too fluid and opaque for the U.S. to be certain that any particular faction, if it came to power, would be the one to best support U.S. interests. In addition, no faction has the political or military power to impose maintainable stability.
- **Conduct an impartial counterterrorism campaign.** The U.S. should degrade the terrorist organizations in Libya, and partner when possible with allies such as France and Italy who are also fighting terrorism in the country. The U.S. must walk a delicate line between assisting groups that are fighting terrorists and avoiding choosing sides in an ugly domestic political fight. To do so, the U.S. should:
 - Maintain tight control over its operations;
 - Provide only counterterrorism support to well-vetted groups with a track record of fighting extremists; and
 - Communicate and enforce the standards a group must attain for the U.S. to provide support.
- **Work to convince the factions an inclusive political agreement is in their best interests.** The competitors for political power in Libya have displayed little resolve to achieve a genuine political settlement. Some likely believe they can seize the country by force or carve out fiefdoms. The U.S. should make it clear that only an equitable political arrangement will bring stability to the country and elicit full American support.
- **Lead a regional response.** The U.S. should use its influence to motivate and unify the many states with interests in Libya to work together toward a stable and terror-free Libya. The U.S. should persuade those countries to join in convincing the Libyan factions that a political agreement is the only solution, and to work with the U.S. to fight Libyan terrorism. The U.S. should also try to persuade any countries that are propping up factions inside Libya to stop.
- **Resist Russian influence.** Russia's likely motivations in Libya are to gain leverage over the West and to frustrate Western policy goals in the region. Doing so would force the West to devote more time and resources to Libya at the expense of other areas of strategic importance to Moscow.
- **Further buttress regional states.** Libyan instability will threaten the region for the foreseeable future. The U.S. should provide appropriate military and economic assistance—especially in the form of counterterrorism capabilities, security-sector reform, and border security—to help American allies protect themselves from the destabilizing and costly effects of Libyan volatility.

7. Counter Extremism Project, "Libya: Extremism & Counter-Extremism," https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/country_pdf/LY-04262017.pdf (accessed May 24, 2017).

No Complacency

Despite the complexity and difficulties of Libya, avoiding engagement with the problem would be damaging to American interests. The current—and potential for future—spillover from Libya is too dangerous, and other countries will try to shape events there in ways that could harm U.S. interests. Now is not the time for complacency.

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