

Third Way

Country Brief:: Libya

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By David Forscey | Published: 05/24/16

TAKEAWAYS

Five years after the 2011 NATO intervention that helped overthrow the regime of Muammar Qadhafi, Libya is still without a unified central government. A civil war has created a security vacuum and safe haven for ISIS and other terrorist groups. A tough and smart approach to Libya requires:

- Destroying ISIS in Libya; and
- Strengthening the UN-brokered unity government.

Libya's ongoing civil war has turned portions of the country into a terrorist safe haven. ISIS has expanded along Libya's central coast, and is vying for control of key oil infrastructure. Europe lies just across the Mediterranean Sea, and refugees fleeing for Italy provide cover for terrorists seeking passage to the West. According to the top U.S. commander in Africa, groups like ISIS will continue to "flourish until the [government] and appropriate security forces are operational within Libya."¹

Background

Recent history in Libya traces back to 1969, when Libyan strongman **Muammar al Qadhafi** seized power in a military coup, and began sponsoring terrorist attacks across the globe, including at least two—destroying an airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland, and a nightclub in Berlin—that killed American citizens. In 1992, the United Nations responded with tough economic sanctions on Libya, but those were lifted in 2003 after Qadhafi admitted involvement in the attacks and abandoned his program to obtain nuclear weapons, surrendering his centrifuges.

The 2011 "Arab Spring" spawned a rebellion against Qadhafi's regime. In March 2011, the United Nations Security Council passed **Resolution 1973**, which authorized member states "to take all necessary measures" to protect Libyan civilians from regime forces.² The United States led an

air campaign that destroyed Qadhafi's air defenses and command-and-control infrastructure, helping Libyan rebels overcome pro-regime militias.³

By the end of 2011, rebel militias had killed Qadhafi, and began preparing for a new government. Some foreign nations suggested placing peacekeeping forces in Libya, but the country's new leaders rejected any foreign presence.⁴ Six months later, Libyans had elected a new General National Congress (GNC).

Unfortunately, the elections did not restore stability. The GNC decided to pay militias left over from the war, who refused to disband, depriving Libya of a unified military command. Weapons looted from Qadhafi's arsenal flooded into the black market.⁵ In September 2012, militants attacked the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, killing a U.S. Ambassador and three other Americans.

Libya has since descended into a chaotic civil war between opposing alliances of nationalist militias and Islamist militias. Neither side answers to a central authority.⁶ The United Nations has brokered a "unity" government to try and end the conflict, but many powerful militias have refused to endorse it.⁷ Without a central government, ISIS has exploited the chaos to grow a new franchise in Libya.

A Tough and Smart Approach to Libya

A tough and smart strategy in Libya means maintaining pressure on ISIS with targeted military operations, while working with local allies and European partners to attract broader support for the unity government. The foremost national security threat to the U.S. in Libya is ISIS, which controls thousands of fighters and has gained a foothold near Libya's oil export facilities.⁸ An ISIS presence so close to Europe simplifies its task of attacking Western interests. The United States should:

- Support local anti-ISIS efforts by using special forces to rebuild intelligence capabilities;
- Arm and share intelligence with vetted Libyan militias who oppose ISIS, but only if they agree to integrate into a centralized security force;
- Work with European allies, particularly Italy, to continue using airbases close to Libya for airstrikes against ISIS training facilities, like the one that occurred in February 2016;⁹

Director of National Intelligence James Clapper testified that political disunity and conflict among militias complicate U.S. efforts to do more in Libya.¹⁰ Thus, the United States must complement its military efforts in Libya by:

- Using its unique authority to convene European allies and Libyan militias of all shapes and sizes;

- Pressure European and Arab states to limit any foreign aid to only those armed groups who commit to join a centralized, neutral security structure.¹¹
- Devote sustained, high-level attention to long-term peace negotiations needed to broaden support for the UN-brokered unity government.

Endnotes

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