

The Twin Battle in Libya: Against the Islamic State and for Unity

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Brief Analysis

A vote by Libya's HOR against recognizing the cabinet of the unity government adds a new threat to the country's stability, despite advances against the Islamic State.

On August 1, the United States initiated airstrikes against the Islamic State's stronghold in Libya. Although a significant victory against IS seems assured, the legitimacy of the Government of National Accord (GNA) is threatened by continuing political rivalries with the previous governing authority, the House of Representatives (HOR), based in the east. The next few weeks could determine whether Libya will maintain a semblance of political unity or descend into another civil war, leaving open the possibility of an IS resurgence -- the very factor that prompted the U.S. summer offensive.

Military Accomplishments

The U.S. strikes that began August 1 targeted IS positions and military hardware in the central coastal city of Sirte, which IS had seized and governed since early 2015. The strikes were initiated when militias from Misratah stumbled after pushing IS back to the central part of the city in early July and began suffering significant casualties from snipers and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) (see "[U.S. Strikes Islamic State in Libya](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-strikes-islamic-state-in-libya)" (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-strikes-islamic-state-in-libya>)). The U.S. decision was prompted by a specific request from Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj to assist local Libyan forces in their efforts to liberate the city. The operation thus had two objectives: to defeat IS in Libya and to support Sarraj and the GNA.

The airstrikes have been carried out by Cobra attack helicopters, Marine AV-8B Harrier jets, and unmanned MQ-9 Reaper drones. The manned aircraft fly from the USS Wasp, off the Libyan coast, and the MQ-9s are being launched

from Jordan and from Sigonella Air Base, in Italy, following Italian approval of their use earlier this month.

As of August 21, the operation, dubbed Odyssey Lightning -- referencing the U.S. Odyssey Dawn operation conducted in March 2011, before NATO's Unified Protector took over the civilian-protection mission against former leader Muammar Qadhafi's forces -- has involved 74 strikes against a combination of tanks, armored vehicles, vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs), and military positions. Although the battle for Sirte continues and will still involve fierce resistance by IS fighters -- who launched five VBIED attacks on August 17 alone -- the tide shifted when the militias seized the Ouagadougou Conference Center on August 10. The GNA and its international backers will next have to contend with "IS Libya 2.0" -- an organization still capable of organizing deadly attacks against Libyan, Tunisian, or potentially European targets from ungoverned areas in Libya's south.

The U.S. Department of Defense has denied that U.S. ground forces have been directly supporting Odyssey Lightning, although a small number of U.S. Special Forces have been in and out of Libya since early this year, gathering intelligence on various militia groups and potential allies. While not serving as forward air controllers on the front lines, U.S. forces, with the assistance of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets, are likely coordinating targets from a militia operations center, as the *Washington Post* reported (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/08/09/u-s-special-operations-forces-are-providing-direct-on-the-ground-support-for-the-first-time-in-libya/>) on August 9. Additionally, British Special Forces have actively supported the militias in combat and advising roles, according to firsthand accounts.

The battle for Sirte is a small but essential part of the U.S. administration's counter-IS efforts and Operation Inherent Resolve in Iraq and Syria. For comparative purposes, operations in Iraq and Syria have entailed 349 strikes (180 of these in Syria, 169 in Iraq) since the beginning of August, nearly five times the operational tempo of Odyssey Lightning. The many differences between the missions begin with geography, with a vast swath in Iraq and Syria offering a stark contrast to Sirte's urban confines. Additionally, the United States has dozens of troops on the ground in Iraq and benefits from a broad international coalition that contributes aircraft and troops. Further, the strikes include standoff weapons, which are not a feature of Odyssey Lightning. However, the comparison is instructive for how much can be accomplished in a short period with the right mix of political support and local forces on the ground. Inherent Resolve began in late 2014 and has only demonstrated significant progress over the past few months.

Endangered Legitimacy of the GNA

If the impending victory over IS was supposed to benefit the GNA, the strategy was dealt a serious blow on August 22, when the HOR surprisingly convened an official quorum for the first time in months and voted against approving the GNA's cabinet. This vote will inevitably elicit multiple interpretations. Domestic opponents of the GNA will argue that the cabinet must immediately disband, that a new prime minister must be appointed, and that this prime minister's cabinet must be approved by the HOR. For their part, GNA backers will protest that the vote was not on the agenda of the HOR's session and thus cannot be considered legitimate. They will also contend that the vote came a day late and a dollar short -- pointing to the lack of an official HOR quorum for months, the specific steps taken by the HOR leadership to obstruct potential votes that would counter its interests, and the provision in the 2015 United Nations-brokered Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) that the GNA became official when the HOR failed to convene a quorum for a month after Sarraj named his cabinet in February.

It is too soon to predict the full impact of the August 22 vote, but the development is certain to deepen the split between the GNA in Tripoli and the HOR in the east. The vote will further complicate efforts to bring about some kind of modus vivendi among the various armed forces in Libya, including the militias from Misratah, which bore the brunt of fighting in Sirte, and parts of the Libyan National Army led by Gen. Khalifa Haftar, who remains opposed to the GNA and backs elements of the HOR. Haftar is conducting a separate campaign against Islamist militias in

Benghazi.

The HOR vote will also endanger the recent deal between the GNA and Ibrahim Jadhnan, who heads the Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG), to reopen three major oil-export terminals. Because that agreement would benefit the GNA, Haftar's forces have threatened the PFG and warned approaching tankers against loading Libyan oil. One such tanker is currently loading oil long stored in the Zuwaitina terminal, with plans to transport it to Libya's refinery in the west. If Haftar follows through on his threats, Libya's potential for economic revival will be set back tremendously; if he concedes, it will represent another instance of the general's failure to follow through on pledges, as with his past claims of unfulfilled military victories. Once again, Libya's fate could be determined by one erratic man.

Options for the Future

U. S. policy toward Libya faces yet another series of complicated options. Should the United States stick with supporting the GNA under Sarraj regardless of the HOR vote? Should Washington acknowledge that the vote complicates support for the current formation of the Presidency Council under Sarraj, thus reopening a debate under the LPA on how to proceed with Libya's political transition? More broadly, should the United States double down in its political engagement with Libyan parties and relevant outside actors, including regional players, or should it pause to let the Libyans themselves determine a viable path forward?

Choosing sides? A key advantage in continuing to back Sarraj is Washington's established relationship with the prime minister. However weak his governing apparatus may be, it can be strengthened gradually through technical assistance and a clear message that U.S. military support will go through him alone. (Such capacity building, however, is impeded by the lack of regular face-to-face interactions between U.S. personnel and Libyan officials given that the U.S. embassy operates out of Tunis and U.S. diplomats have not visited Tripoli for two years.) The primary risk in this approach is that it could alienate key segments of the country, especially in the east, making Sarraj more vulnerable to appearing like a Western puppet, a charge he is already weathering.

Renewing diplomacy. In an ideal scenario, more talk among Libya's factions, mediated by the UN, would produce an agreement whereby the HOR affirms the LPA and, with modest changes to the government, agrees to become the legislative body while allowing the Presidency Council to govern. However, more than likely, such a process would take months to negotiate and a new government would have to begin tackling Libya's challenges from an even weaker position than that occupied by the current government.

The most likely scenario is that the inertia of the present U.S. policy will continue: supporting Sarraj and the GNA while seeking a formula to bring the HOR and Haftar into the political process. Such an approach may be logical if the August 22 vote is only a speed bump. But if that vote starts looking more like a wall, U.S. policymakers may need to reconceptualize the nature of American all-out support for the GNA, or at least how the GNA relates to the political powers in Libya's east.

Ben Fishman, a former research associate at The Washington Institute, is the editor of the 2015 book North Africa in Transition: The Struggle for Democracies and Institutions. He served on the National Security Council staff from 2009 to 2013, including as director for North Africa and Jordan. ❖

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