

Libya's Struggle for Stability May Require Greater Western Involvement

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Brief Analysis

As rival militias continue to dominate Libya's political and security landscape and the Islamic State threatens to evolve into a different but no less potent problem, the West should consider stepping up its efforts to foster a unified and functional national government.

More than three months into its tenure, Libya's Government of National Accord is struggling to build legitimacy and public support. Although the militias responsible for gaining ground in the fight against the Islamic State (IS) have pledged loyalty to the GNA, it remains unclear how these forces -- primarily from the northwestern city of Misratah -- will act following a potential victory. In the best case, they will remain loyal to the GNA and become part of a new Libyan military; alternatively, they could return to Tripoli and hold the government hostage, as occurred for much of 2013-2014, a scenario that would reignite a civil war with eastern forces. Regardless of the progress made against IS, the GNA will likely require greater support from the international community before it can improve the prospects for Libya's long-term stability.

A STRING OF INEFFECTIVE GOVERNMENTS

The GNA, Libya's fourth interim government, was born out of a civil war between elements of the second interim government, the General National Congress (GNC), and supporters of the third interim government, the House of Representatives (HOR). Neither of these entities functioned well. The GNC -- elected in July 2012, less than a year after Muammar Qadhafi's death -- was internally divided almost from the start. One faction was relatively secular and moderate (by the standards of Libya's conservative Muslim society), consisting partly of former mid-level Qadhafi officials. Although this faction received the plurality of votes in national elections, it was soon outmaneuvered by a second GNC camp consisting of Islamist-leaning legislators who wanted to purge all former

Qadhafi officials. The second faction triumphed when it forced a vote on legislation similar to Iraq's de-Baathification law; the bill passed, with militias outside parliament threatening its opponents.

When the GNC's mandate lapsed, new elections were held in June 2014. The non-Islamist faction prevailed again, but Islamist GNC members refused to recognize the results, citing low voter turnout and questioning the legality of the new electoral law. This fissure effectively produced two governments: an HOR-approved cabinet in the east that soon obtained international recognition, and a holdout government of former GNC members in Tripoli.

Meanwhile, violence had broken out before the 2014 election between the so-called "Dawn" and "Dignity" coalitions. Gen. Khalifa Haftar, a retired officer who had lived in exile in the United States until returning to Libya in 2011, led the Dignity coalition, gaining popularity in the east by announcing a war against Islamist terrorism and rallying military officers who were being targeted by a spate of assassinations in Benghazi. In response, other militias -- mainly from Misratah, along with Islamist-leaning eastern factions such as Ansar al-Sharia -- formed the Dawn coalition. Violence intensified throughout 2014, forcing the departure of international representatives from Tripoli that summer.

ENTER UN NEGOTIATIONS

UN Special Representative Bernardino Leon, a Spanish diplomat and former EU official, led efforts to halt the violence and produce a unity agreement between a cross-section of Libyan factions. After fits and starts and multiple drafts, the Libya Political Agreement (LPA) was signed on December 17, 2015, in Morocco. It established the terms of a new governing structure, the GNA, which consisted of several overlapping institutions. A nine-person Presidency Council would function as an executive body overseeing a cabinet; the council would be geographically and politically diverse and require unanimity for major decisions. The HOR would remain in its role as the legislative body, while the GNC would function as a "State Council" with an ambiguous advisory role. Despite criticisms of the GNA's design, the UN and its partners preferred a flawed deal to no deal, and organized a ministerial conference in Rome that endorsed the newly established government.

The GNA has struggled to get off the ground ever since. It has been forced to operate from a naval base in Tripoli, and key ministers and Presidency Council members have resigned. Nevertheless, the international community, especially European ministers, continue to visit Tripoli and demonstrate their support for the GNA. Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj has sought to address the country's most critical issues, including shortages of electricity, water, fuel, and local currency, but he has very limited resources. As a result of the ongoing instability, oil production has dropped from a post-revolution high of 1.4 million barrels per day to approximately 400,000.

Politically, elements of the HOR still refuse to endorse the LPA and GNA. Among their reasons for holding out is the question of General Haftar's future. With the recent success of Misratan militias against IS in the central coastal city of Sirte, the HOR and other easterners fear that the GNA will succumb to pro-Islamist revolutionaries from Misratah -- that is, Haftar's former civil war opponents. Complicating matters is the continued support Haftar receives from regional actors. While Egypt and the United Arab Emirates have signed international pledges of support to the GNA, they are widely suspected of providing Haftar with arms and resources to take on Islamist militias in the east, regardless of his questionable effectiveness and concerns about civilian casualties. Haftar also visited Moscow in late June, adding to the chances that he will maintain independent support and continue operating outside the GNA's control.

OPTIONS GOING FORWARD

For the duration of the Obama administration, Western policy toward Libya will likely remain status quo. That entails "light footprint" support for the country's anti-IS campaign, including airstrikes against key terrorist targets and Special Forces advise-and-assist missions to militias nominally loyal to the GNA. It also entails political

backing and limited technocratic support (to the extent security conditions permit) for the GNA as it builds its legitimacy and effectiveness.

This approach assumes the least risk, especially in light of recent progress in the anti-IS campaign. But its main downside is a prolonged stasis in Libyan society, which will translate into long-term instability. Infrastructure projects aimed at bolstering the GNA cannot be expected to provide quick "wins" given the poor state of Libya's workforce readiness and existing infrastructure, not to mention its overly bureaucratic system for construction. Regarding security, IS has already previewed its post-Sirte strategy with car bombings and suicide attacks from Benghazi to Tripoli. While eliminating the Sirte safe haven is unquestionably positive, the terrorist group can be expected to retreat into Libya's ungoverned south, making the need for a unified and effective national government all the more pressing (for more on the group's future strategy in Libya, [see PolicyWatch 2650, "Defeating the Islamic State in Sirte: Secondary Effects and Remaining Challenges" \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/defeating-the-islamic-state-in-sirte-secondary-effects-and-remaining-challe\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/defeating-the-islamic-state-in-sirte-secondary-effects-and-remaining-challe)).

An alternative option is to revisit the concept of expanded Western involvement that was explored at the end of 2015. At the time, the United States and its European partners, particularly France, Italy, and Britain, were discussing potential deployments to Libya to help train a new national security force while protecting the GNA and international diplomatic facilities in the interim. Figures varied for the size of this potential deployment, from 10,000 to 12,000 troops. These proposals were shelved for several reasons, including evaluations of risk, the lack of an official Libyan request for such assistance, and limited domestic political support in Europe, which would provide the bulk of the troops. Once Sirte is recaptured, however, planners and decisionmakers should revive those discussions to determine how best to take advantage of the progress against IS, prevent militias from dominating Tripoli again, and adopt a security environment most permissive to making the government functional, rebuilding critical infrastructure, and resuming oil production.

The final and most challenging option is to hold initial discussions on federalism and decentralization under the auspices of developing an alternative framework for Libya's stalled constitution drafting process. Although the GNA should be supported maximally, the UN or a development agency should commission a study about how the concepts of federalism and decentralization could apply to Libya. Particular attention should be devoted to balancing the profits from natural resources against regional divisions and political sources of power, as well as outlining how militias could form the basis of a national military force in such a system. In essence, the goal would be to undo the overly centralized system inherited from Qadhafi and devolve authority to local powers with their own budgets. Such a formula could establish the basis for a "Plan B" should it become clear that the GNA will not be able to stabilize Libya.

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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