

The Use of Violence in Libya

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Articles & Testimony

While the onus of change is on Libyans themselves, the international community must also take a stand against the various extremist political movements impeding a peaceful solution, whether they are Islamist or 'liberal.'

Politics and the use of violence and force do not mix. Politics become impossible when force -- in this context physical force supported by weapons -- begins.

Therefore, we can say that over the past five years, Libya has been completely blocked from entering into a functional political process, which was doomed when the National Transitional Council allowed military councils to govern Libya's cities. These military councils consisted of warlords who rose to power as a result of the early militarization of the revolution. By promoting the militarization of power, these councils prevented local civilian leadership from guiding institutional work. It is this reality that most threatens the current UN-backed peace deal from successful implementation.

Moreover, the National Transitional Council turned a blind eye to the actions of those carrying weapons in the name of the revolution, so much so that the council itself ultimately became a pawn in their hands. Yet the Islamists who controlled the council may have intended the weakening of a centralized system, as their policies systematically focused on weakening Libya's military establishment. These efforts were particularly evident in Benghazi, where military divisions -- led by Gen. Abdul Fattah Younes -- clashed with the people during the early days of the revolution. Later, General Younes would be captured and brutally murdered following the issue of Decision No. 29 that formed an Islamist brigade of fighters, based on documents fabricated by Islamist extremists and signed by well-known Islamist leader Ali al-Isawi.

The dissolution of the state and the succession of its military institution lie at the root of this new dominance of militia mentality. This mentality ensured that the state was rebuilt along lines that secured the centrality of new political forces affiliated with political Islam or those associated with provincial centers such as the so-called "Victorious Cities," the most prominent of which were Misratah and Zintan.

Conflict between these two camps -- Islamist and the provincial -- was inevitable. However, in the early stages the two groups cooperated at the expense of the nascent state. Their cooperation is particularly visible in the establishment of provincial and local Durua (Shield) protection units, such as those established with Decision No. 29. The media, in support of the fragmentation of the Libyan revolution's nationalist project, began demonizing the Libyan army and police. Thus began a policy of suppressing dissent and assassinating army and police personnel. The conflict between civil society and extremists, both of the religious and regionalist varieties, was most intense in Benghazi -- this is probably due to the city's rich social tapestry, early entry into the revolution, and history of civil and cultural action.

The Islamists worked to distance themselves from prominent military leaders such as Col. Wanis Bu Khamadh, charged with securing the city of Sebha, and Col. Salah Bu Haliqah, who was put in charge of Sirte. Benghazi was left to the Islamist factions supported by Qatar. The city's local council and the Transitional Council worked together to gut the city's police system and establish a parallel body known as the "security council" with local warlords -- all of whom were later discovered to be extremists -- assuming leadership of its smaller divisions. The political and media rhetoric began to identify with the group known as Ansar al-Sharia. The number of assassinations and terror attacks in the city increased, culminating in the events at the American consulate.

Benghazi's civil society had no weapons except protest, and so they organized the "Friday to Save Benghazi." This effort may have been enough to correct the path of the revolution if Libyan democracy had produced experienced politicians with the competence to lead Libya. Instead, the Libyan General National Congress election attracted the country's mercenaries, human-traffickers, drug dealers, criminals, and war lords. When they were elected to the Libyan Congress, they refused to lay down their weapons and worked to terminate any popular movement against them.

Then in a scene seared into the memories of Libyans, these militia leaders held a press conference to announce the legality of their oppressive militia project. Just a few days after the National Congress election, these militia leaders had made themselves abundantly clear. Indeed, the period of the National Congress's rule was the "spring" of the militia project in Libya, where they easily passed favorable legislation and isolated political opponents. For example, it is no secret that members of the National Congress participated in the attack on the city of Bani Walid and the assault on Warshefana with the pretense of removing enemies and settling old scores.

No one dared enter the political arena without the support of a militia sponsor. Resignations of the National Congress piled up until the body came to represent only a subset of the population. Having lost its popular base, the popular movement against Congress gained steam, leading to the results of the February Committee and eventually forcing the National Congress to conduct new legislative elections and move Libya into a third transitional stage. At this point the announcement of a constitution was akin to the announcement of an administrative rule, given the large number of amendments appended onto the document in such a short time.

When the Islamists lost the elections, their military wings began to expand. These groups, which disguised themselves under the name of "Revolutionary Shura Councils," are a mix of al-Qaeda-affiliated Ansar al-Sharia, another strain allied with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and the remnants of the Durua Protection Units led by their leaders in Misratah.

The National Congress, after its resuscitation following the Fajr Libya (Libyan Dawn) movement, did not hesitate to bet on this mix of groups to accomplish what it itself failed to do in eliminating the army. The Congress offered the groups logistical, political, and media support in this mission despite the fact that the Shura Councils are dominated by extremists opposed to the entire democratic process.

The Machiavellian nature of the Islamist movement justifies the use of terrorism in order to achieve the goal of

remaining in power -- the ends justify the means. In fact, this is exactly what they have accomplished by imposing themselves as a political player. The reality is that the Islamist movement has nothing to gain from cooling down their support for these terrorist militias, evidenced by the length of time that the radical wing of the Islamist movement blocked any peaceful solution or participation in a United Nations-brokered dialogue.

Alternatively, Congress is not free of radical elements, although in this case they are of the regionalist variety. These groups that promote decentralization hope to impede political efforts to resolve the Libyan crisis to lead to partition.

Recently, a moderate wing of Congress has appeared that has attempted to practice politics without weapons, helping to broker a peace deal between factions of the General National Congress and factions of the House of Representatives with the assistance and supervision of the UN delegation promoting a unity government. Nonetheless, the lack of cohesion within the groups themselves makes it unlikely that the armed sections will submit to this new deal.

While all this is going on, one Libyan city after another -- Darnah, Sirte, Ajdabiya -- falls to the Islamic State. If Libya's future continues to be controlled by the same players, Sabratha and Tripoli will not be far behind.

This disorder in the political system that began with the Libyan revolution is the result of hunger for power. In this light, the revolution and its honorable goals have been manipulated into cover used by warlords, criminals, and religious and regional extremists to distract from their atrocities.

Thus, what passes for democracy in Libya is a combination of religiosity, tribalism, regionalism, and force of arms. In this reality, the results of elections do not represent any real political representation. Rather, they are closer to a primitive reaction disconnected from any party framework or mature public opinion. This is true whether the Islamists are leading or marginalized; these challenges are pervasive across ideologies.

Libya's experiences over the past five years demonstrate that extremist terrorist groups, regardless of ideology or motivation, are all one in the same. War and politics are inseparable twins in Libya. Whether we are talking about those groups that practice *taqiyya* and indulge the people by accepting democracy or those who call any participants in that project infidels -- lifting up the mantle of the Islamic State -- they achieve the same destruction and erosion of the revolution's honorable goals.

The solution to this disaster lies in a number of internal, regional, and international measures that can be summarized as follows:

First, unity, denouncement of terrorism, rejecting militarization of the state, and commitment to building a modern civil state are internal goals most deserving of Libyans' attention and insistence. Libyan citizens must demand a state of citizenship, law, and institutions. This will require the solidarity of civil society, human rights groups, activists, and journalists to form a united front to spread awareness and pull the rug out from underneath the warlords.

Even more important, the Committee of Sixty -- Libya's constitutional committee -- must complete its work. The resulting constitution in Libya should be closer to the original philosophical concept of a social contract more than it is a political and legal necessity, in that it must transform the current elements of society into a civil society. There must be agreement on the results of the committee's work, and if they fail, then Libyans must press forward and reexamine how to draft the constitution.

The choice of returning to the 1951 "independence" constitution remains one of the options that gains considerable resonance with a large portion of the people. However, the most important task of a constitution or any political efforts is to form a national unity government, and that we not be content with only appendixes found in the agreement. While the UN-negotiated agreement is a start, implementation will be the most difficult aspect of these

efforts.

Moreover, the unity government must have clear guidelines for handling a number of contentious issues. These include security issues such as disarming the militias, demobilizing and reintegrating fighters into different sectors of the state security institutions and national army, and finally eliminating the possibility of military intervention in political affairs. Then there are economic issues such as revitalizing the economy and saving the Libyan currency from collapse. Finally, there are issues related to reconciliation and transitional justice.

Last but not least, there must be an agreement signed by all political blocs denouncing violence and disassociating from any group that uses weapons against the state in the name of religion, revolution, or regionalism.

While the onus of change is on the Libyans themselves, the international community must also support efforts to achieve stability in Libya. The international community and the United Nations must take a stand against those extremist political movements, whether they are Islamist or "liberal," impeding a peaceful solution to the Libyan crisis. The Security Council's Sanctions Committee and Counter-Terrorism Committee must designate these groups as terrorists with no legitimate political affiliation.

And while the outline for a United Nations-brokered dialogue has been laid out and a peace agreement reached, those signatories must be supported and the goal pressed for until it achieves its conclusion, all while the fight against terrorism continues. There is significant room for regional powers to make a real difference on this front. There must be an initiative from both the Arab League and African Union -- and if possible the Organization of Islamic Cooperation as well -- to pressure both the Qatar-Turkey axis and the Emirates axis to halt their influencing of Libya. More broadly, this initiative should prevent all nations, including those supporting armed gangs in the south, particularly Chad and Niger, from intervening in Libya's affairs.

Libya's recent history and current political instability show that despite the recent UN-backed peace deal, there is a long and dangerous road ahead before the hopes of the revolution can begin to be realized, and that Libyan politics can be resuscitated from the clutches of violence.

Nisreen Amer is chairwoman of Human Rights Activists Without Borders. This article was originally published on the [Fikra website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=8302\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=8302). ❖

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