

U.S. Allies Bombing Islamists: The UAE Airstrikes on Libya

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Aug 25, 2014

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Brief Analysis

A coalition of like-minded Arab states -- Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates -- is emerging to confront militant Islamism.

Today, the *New York Times* reported that Egypt and the UAE have launched joint airstrikes against Islamist militias fighting for control of the Libyan capital. Details are sparse, but strikes were apparently conducted twice in the past week, with Egypt providing the bases for UAE aircraft. Significantly, neither country informed Washington in advance of the raids or sought U.S. consent. In fact, U.S. officials were reportedly unsure about the UAE's involvement until after the second round of raids.

The strikes likely indicate frustration in Cairo and Abu Dhabi with the lack of U.S. action to stabilize Libya and act against growing anarchy in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is the third component of this new axis; the leaders of all three countries have held a series of high-level meetings in recent months. Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and de facto ruler of the UAE, visited King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia while the latter vacationed in Morocco earlier this summer. The king also met with Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi in the top deck of his Boeing 747 at Cairo airport on the way back home.

All three leaders share a dislike for Islamism and the Muslim Brotherhood, putting them at odds with other regional powers such as Turkey and Qatar. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are also concerned about Iran and its emerging status as a regional hegemon. A new twist is that Saudi and Emirati antipathy toward Qatar now appears to be morphing into a proxy war, with Doha reportedly backing Islamist groups in Libya.

Whatever the case, the air raids on Tripoli have seemingly failed in their purpose -- Islamist forces are reportedly in control of the city's airport. Although the UAE air force is said to be one of the best trained and certainly best equipped Arab air forces, doubts remain about its competency. Three years ago, when the UAE joined the coalition effort to overthrow Muammar Qadhafi, two of its F-16s crashed at Italian air bases due to pilot error.

Cairo and Abu Dhabi have yet to comment on the *New York Times* report, but a senior U.S. official was quoted as

saying, "We don't see this as constructive at all." Given that Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE are among Washington's closest allies in the Middle East, some urgent diplomatic repair work seems necessary.

Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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