

# A Way Forward in Benghazi

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

## Helping the Libyan government root militias out of Benghazi and secure the city would go a long way toward securing the country as a whole.

The bloody June 8 clash between the Libya Shield militia and protestors demanding its dissolution gives the weak Libyan government an opportunity to capitalize on popular opinion against such brigades. Much like the September 2012 "Save Benghazi" demonstrations that followed the murder of U.S. ambassador Christopher Stevens and other personnel, this weekend's protest targeted an Islamist militia that, despite its semiofficial government imprimatur, largely oversees its own agenda and is led by figures with loose ties to al-Qaeda. Yet Tripoli is unlikely to harness the moment without greater U.S. security assistance.

## WHY BENGHAZI MATTERS

The proud cradle of Libya's revolution, Benghazi, has arisen once again to protest unwelcome rule, only this time against increasingly unpopular militias. On June 8, a land dispute between the Libya Shield's 1st Brigade and the owners of a compound used by the militia erupted into a broader demonstration demanding the brigade's dissolution. At least 41 people, mostly protestors, were killed, and over 150 were wounded. In response, Army Chief of Staff Yousef al-Mangoush resigned, and the temporary head of the General National Congress, Libya's first popularly elected legislative body, declared three days of national mourning.

Libyans say that whoever controls Benghazi will control the country. Indeed, the city holds the political pulse of postrevolution Libya: Islamist extremists allied with al-Qaeda chose it for their most high-profile operation, the September U.S. consulate attack; federalists who aspire to return to the 1951 constitution have repeatedly decried Tripoli's neglect of the city; and powerful militias contesting state authority have maintained their independence in Benghazi for more than a year-and-a-half since the war. Establishing security there would go a long way toward calming the political scene and fostering a sustainable transition.

## THE LIBYA SHIELD

To make up for its weakness following the revolution, the nascent central government cultivated semiofficial

militias to help recruit rebels and project state authority. The Interior Ministry came to rely on the Supreme Security Committee (SSC), while the Defense Ministry relied on the Libya Shield as a stand-in for the inchoate national army. While the Interior Ministry has made commendable progress in dissolving the SSC and integrating its fighters into the regular police force, the Defense Ministry has not been as successful. The army's forty-three brigades lack command and control, and the tension between Qadhafi-era soldiers and new rebel recruits is palpable.

Many former rebel brigades joined the SSC and Libya Shield as whole units, which prevented their dissolution and produced conflicting loyalties. As Col. Hamad bil Khair told Aljazeera on May 23, such groups "don't take orders from us. They are outside the army's chain of command structure." And after Saturday's clash, Jumaa al-Saih, chairman of the legislature's Defense Committee, told the network that such groups are still better armed than the state.

Indeed, the Libya Shield has become an army unto itself. Reports on the militia first surfaced in March 2012, as rebels who had fought on the eastern front during the revolution were being recruited by militia leaders and the government. Its first missions were seemingly innocuous patrols along Libya's porous southeastern border, but the militia was accused of heavy-handedness when it was dispatched to the Kufra district in April 2012 to halt clashes between Zwai Arabs and the minority Tebu tribe. The militia sided with the Arabs, sparking exaggerated Tebu accusations that Shield fighters were pursuing "an extermination policy"; the militia was later forced to pull out.

Since then, Coptic Christians in Benghazi have accused the Libya Shield's 1st Brigade -- the unit that opened fire on protestors this weekend -- of running a torture center and targeting individuals with a cross tattooed on their wrist. The brigade is viewed as antifederalist and deeply Islamist; commander Wisam bin Hamid and his lieutenant, Hafiz al-Aghuri (a.k.a. Hayaka Alla), were both identified as having jihadist sympathies in an August 2012 Library of Congress report. Moreover, during an early 2012 jihadist parade held in Sirte, bin Hamid reportedly hosted Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the former leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb who has been tied to the September consulate attack and the January 16, 2012, attack against Algeria's In Amenas gas facility.

## **LOST OPPORTUNITIES**

**I**ncreasing public outrage against militias, especially after this weekend's bloodshed, presents an opportunity for Tripoli to assert its authority. If recent history is any indicator, however, the government will likely miss the opportunity. Last September, thousands of Libyans outraged over the U.S. consulate attack took to the streets of Benghazi, where they called for ending government sanctioning of independent and semiofficial armed groups, criminalizing militias that refused to disband, clearing public buildings occupied by militia personnel, and activating the official army and police. Protestors also overran the facilities of Islamist militias suspected of complicity in the attack, such as Ansar al-Sharia and units belonging to the "February 17" and Rafallah al-Sahati Brigades.

In response, Chief of Staff Mangoush made nominal gestures to bring the militias under state control by appointing commanders to the latter two, while Ansar al-Sharia withdrew from public sight. Yet the state failed to capitalize on that momentum -- the rebel brigades eventually sidelined Mangoush's commanders, and Ansar al-Sharia reemerged in Benghazi to provide security for the city's al-Jala Hospital. Moreover, Mangoush's last act before resigning this week was to announce that four Libya Shield brigades in Benghazi would be transferred to the military, but not dismantled, allowing them to preserve their own chain of command.

The leaders of the Libya Shield's 1st Brigade are in hiding for now, but they could reassert themselves as Islamist militias did after the September protests. The state continues to rely on such groups to carry out tasks the army cannot, and this approach ensures that it will remain incapable of establishing authority over Benghazi. Much like the aftermath of the "Save Benghazi" protest, not much is liable to change in the wake of June 8.

## **A WAY FORWARD FOR WASHINGTON AND TRIPOLI**

To be sure, the government has made some progress in developing its security sector. In mid-March, a joint army/police task force named "Operation Tripoli" began to clear some 540 occupied locations, dismantle unauthorized militias, and fight criminal groups, achieving moderate success. Similarly, the government authorized a joint security task force for Benghazi on May 15, with the Thunderbolt Special Forces taking the lead. To date, these forces have been more successful than the Libya Shield and other semiofficial militias in confronting adverse elements in Benghazi, making arrests, and generating new intelligence.

Yet the Tripoli task force is ill equipped, while the Special Forces in Benghazi are not trained to secure cities and may soon depart. Recent reports that U.S. officials will ask NATO allies about establishing a military training mission are encouraging but insufficient. Hesitation or delays in deploying trainers to Libya need not stand in the way, since training could also be conducted in a partner country (as seen in Jordan, where Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton oversaw U.S. training of Palestinian security forces). Nor should such concerns preclude more direct security assistance in coordination with the UN Support Mission in Libya. For example, a significant portion of military sales and assistance by U.S. allies has been tailored to address illegal immigration across the Mediterranean Sea, such as providing Tripoli with rigid-hull interceptor boats. While important, this type of help does little to secure Libyan cities. Washington and its partners should therefore rethink their security assistance priorities.

Granted, there are many challenges to engaging the Libyan authorities. Political uncertainty in Tripoli and the need to vet units that will receive assistance are justifiable concerns. Accordingly, engagement should include efforts to ensure transparency and improve the chain of command within the Libyan Defense Ministry, as well as a broader focus on rule of law and democracy, which President Obama has pledged to support. The United States has an opportunity to help the Libyan government capitalize on public sentiment against militias known for abusing their power and maintaining ties with jihadist organizations. Rooting such groups out of Benghazi and securing the city with government forces would go a long way toward securing the country as a whole.

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