

MEIA Research Panel

LIBYAN CIVIL WAR

From NATO Intervention to Islamist Emergence

Introductory Statement by Wolfgang Puztai (4 February 2015)

NATO-Intervention

In mid-February 2011, I was in Tripoli and the surrounding areas witnessing the Libyan uprising against the Gaddafi regime. It should be mentioned that from classified sources I knew that Gaddafi tried to prevent an escalation of the expected demonstrations. He gave the strict order not to react to provocations or to fire at demonstrators. However, his security forces did what they had always done on such occasions, and so the situation escalated rapidly from the outset.

There are **discussions about the various justifications for the subsequent international intervention** in Libya, but from what I have seen on the ground I have absolutely no doubt that Gaddafi tried his utmost to fulfill his promise “to kill all the rats.” There would have been enormous bloodshed if he had not been stopped at the gates of Benghazi by the bombs of the coalition. Even Srebrenica would have been overshadowed by these crimes. When I think back to his infamous speech on Tripoli’s Green Square, I can still feel the cold shiver that I felt that evening.

The **political framework for the international intervention** was very much appropriate. The Arab League’s call for a no-fly zone to protect civilians and the subsequent UNSCR 1973 provided the proper legal foundation. Several Arab Nations’ contribution to the operation increased its credibility significantly.

However, the conduct of “Operation Unified Protector” was far from perfect. There were the well-known shortfalls in the areas of intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, targeting, and others that hampered the day-to-day conduct of the operation.

A major mistake took place after the Gaddafi regime’s fall. The Libyans stated on every occasion that they did not require foreign soldiers on the ground or any kind of major international support mission for state building. Moreover, neither NATO nor the EU were eager to send troops to Libya after their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. The overstretched UN was very cautious, too. As a logical consequence, no such mission took place. In hindsight, it would have been better to deploy a security and state-building mission immediately after the fall of the regime.

In the years thereafter, **some kind of state building support took place**, but this was too little, too late.

Current Situation

Even if there was a potential opportunity to make post-Gaddafi Libya a role model for other states in the region¹, it now seems very likely that the country **is on the way to a prolonged civil war**. This could mean a very dangerous “Lebanonization” of Libya in the years to come.

Policymakers and the media should not make the mistake of assuming that the Libyan civil war consists of only two sides.² Although the House of Representative (HoR) based in Tobruk and the General National Congress (GNC) based in Tripoli dominate the political discussion, shifting allegiances and volatile tribal dynamics suggest a much more fragmented environment. The respective leaderships hold quite limited influence over the armed elements in the conflict. The HoR-aligned Operation Dignity and GNC-aligned Operation Libya Dawn each comprise unconsolidated militia groups and remaining military factions, united by a common enemy. Several of them adopt one alliance or another in nothing more than name.

As it looks now, the situation in Libya will continue to deteriorate further.

The **Salafi Jihadist** influence will grow in the Libya Dawn Coalition. As the Islamic State (IS) comes under more pressure in its core territory in Iraq and Syria, it becomes increasingly active in Libya.

Egypt will prevent the establishment of a Jihadist state on its western border by further supporting the anti-Islamist coalition, regardless of who is in charge of it. As a last resort, the al-Sisi government would also conduct a direct military intervention.

The internationally recognized Libyan government needs technical support for the maintenance of the Libyan National Army’s numerous Soviet weapon systems as well as some modern equipment. **Russia** is willing to provide both and seeks further involvement in Libya.

Regardless of all their efforts, **none of the warring factions will be able to secure a decisive victory**. Terrorists will continue to use Libya for their own purposes, and human traffickers will smuggle numerous illegal immigrants into Europe.

It is evident that an **unstable Libya** will have **significant negative impacts** not only on the MENA region but also on Europe.

1 See Wolfgang Puzstai, “A Western Strategy for Libya,” The German Marshall Fund of the United States & Istituto Affari Internazionali, Opinions on the Mediterranean, June 2014, <http://www.gmfus.org/archives/a-western-strategy-for-libya/> , <http://www.iai.it/content.asp?langid=2&contentid=1128>.

2 See Wolfgang Puzstai, “What is Plan B for Libya?”, Atlantic Council – MENASource, 30 January, 2015, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/what-is-plan-b-for-libya>.

Possible Options for External Actors

No single nation can successfully deal with the ongoing escalation in Libya on its own. International cooperation is necessary to bring the situation under control. However, for any common strategy to be successful, it is first essential to understand the strategic interests of the actors.³

Strategic Interests

Strategic interests drive strategies. Therefore, they must be clearly identified. With regard to Libya, the strategic interests of the US and Europe contain discrepancies. Even within Europe they differ significantly. Whereas some European countries have vital security and economic interests in or in relation to Libya, this is not the case for all EU states or the US. It is most likely that the US has direct interests only in connection to fighting terrorism, but even those are not vital. Therefore, the Americans will not risk the lives of their soldiers on the ground. Of course, there is also the common interest of value preservation / value promotion, but this does not justify taking such high risks either.

Within the strategic context, the interests of Libya's neighbors must also be correctly assessed in order to understand their intentions. It is important to take their military options into account.

Strategic objective – Option 1

For the time being, the western strategic objective might be **“fostering a successful transition process.”** This means that the aim of the transition process must be a stable, democratic Libya that is able to benefit from its natural resources to promote socio-economic development for its population, whilst preventing terrorists and organized crime networks from using its territory to stage operations.

There are three potential courses of action (CoA) directly serving this objective:

CoA A) Continuation of current policies

In this case, emphasis would be given to dialogue and negotiations, in order to find solutions to the various existing problems.

This could work, particularly if Qatar, Turkey, the UAE, and some other countries could be motivated to use their influence in a more positive way. Nonetheless, even then, Libya's current situation would very much likely deteriorate further.

³ See Wolfgang Puzstai, “Which Choices for Libya's Final Opportunity?,” Intro-Statement to the Camera dei Deputati Workshop “Last Chance for Libya” October 24, 2014, Rome; published by ISPI, http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/puzstai_introstatement241014_0.pdf.

CoA B) Significant diplomatic pressure, focused sanctions, and eventually a limited Peace Support Operation (PSO) to guarantee a ceasefire⁴

Diplomatic pressure and focused sanctions should force all sides – of course excluding terrorist organizations – to participate in sincere negotiations. Being as inclusive as possible, these negotiations should bring the most important democracy-oriented factions to the negotiation table. A ceasefire in northern Tripolitania would be the immediate goal.

It would probably be necessary to enforce a ceasefire, at least in and around the capital, with the help of an international intervention, in order to prevent the renewed outbreak of hostilities. As a last resort, it would focus on establishing the safe and secure environment for CoA C (significantly enhanced state building support).

Among the preconditions for such a PSO are a ceasefire, at least in northern Tripolitania, an invitation backed by the vast majority of the legitimate representation of the Libyans, and a mandate by either the UN or a regional organization such as the Arab League.

The PSO would be conducted in the capital area only and for a limited period of time. The objective would be to stabilize the situation in and around Tripoli to allow for the consolidation of the government and the build-up of security forces. It is crucial to protect the government from incessant attempts of blackmail and to establish a safe and secure environment for state building in the capital. The subsequent expansion of the “security & prosperity bubble” would have to be ensured by the Libyans themselves.

CoA C) Investing in a significantly enhanced state building support

This means a strictly prioritized step-by-step approach, as it is not realistic to expect that all the tasks of state building could be achieved everywhere simultaneously. Initially, it would be necessary to focus on the capital. The whole process would be accompanied by a reconciliation process, first locally then nation-wide, and DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization & Reintegration).

It is obvious that a certain amount of security and stability is a precondition for this course of action. Therefore, this CoE is currently not a viable option, but can hopefully be brought to the table in the future.

The current United Nations Support Mission in Libya (**UNSMIL**) mediation efforts constitute a **major step** in the right direction to stabilize Libya, **but realistically, the prospects for peace are not too bright**. The leaders of the warring factions have not (yet) expressed their readiness for sincere negotiations, with both sides still believing that they maintain the advantage on the battlefield. Even if there is a compromise, it is unlikely that all the factional leaders will accept it.

So what are the fallback options? **What is “Plan B?”**⁵

⁴ See Wolfgang Puztai, “Libya – Time for an International Intervention?,” ISPI Policy Briefs, No. 227, September 2014, <http://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/libya-time-international-intervention-11239>.

⁵ See Puztai, “What is Plan B for Libya?”

Strategic objective – Option 2

Due to the current chaotic situation, the strategic objective, namely “a successful transition process to a stable, democratic Libya,” remains illusive for the time being. However, this objective should remain the long-term goal. In the meantime, Bismarck’s *realpolitik* will have to replace idealistic approaches. A more realistic immediate strategic objective is **“accepting the Lebanization of Libya while containing the conflict and mitigating the risks.”**

CoA D) Containment and risk mitigation would be the CoA to achieve this objective.

Surgical strikes on high-value terrorist targets and enhanced border control from the outside could be major pillars of a containment strategy. Surgical strikes can only be performed by capable Western nations or by a sophisticated Arab air force. Enhanced control of Libya’s borders from the outside could be conducted in partnership with the neighboring states. Due to the extent of the borderline, seamless surveillance is not realistic. In spite of this, optimal effort is required to limit human trafficking, arms & fuel smuggling, and the transit of terrorists.

Such a strategy could be sufficient to serve US strategic interests, but would fall short of European objectives. The strategy would aim solely at the mitigation of security risks originating from Libya.

Strategic objective – Option 3

An immediate strategic objective of **“preventing a radical Islamist or even a failed state”** seems more appropriate. Although US interests in Libya may differ from those of Western Europe, this new strategic approach would serve both Europe and the US, as well as Libya’s neighboring countries.

While the conduct of the HoR and al-Thinni’s government departs from Western standards, they represent one of the few suitable partners in Libya with whom international partners could pursue this immediate strategic objective. Working with them is a matter of necessity. The increasing split among the HoR elements makes it even more critical to support al-Thinni.

There are two CoAs to achieve this objective:

CoA E) Substantial support to the HoR

Western partners – or better yet, regional partners – could provide substantial support including weapons after lifting the arms embargo, equipment, intelligence, and training – through the internationally recognized government to the anti-Islamist forces. The military assistance should enable them to defeat the jihadists in Benghazi and Derna and regain control over the Jafarah plain in northern Tripolitania.

CoA F) Military intervention

Alternatively, an international military intervention in support of the HoR could either aim for a decisive victory of the latter or focus solely on some important strategic areas (e.g. southern Fezzan or northern Cyrenaica and the Sirte Basin). The military intervention would not necessarily have to be led by a Western-led coalition. On the contrary, the Arab League, which should mandate such an intervention anyway, or a group of neighboring states would probably be the better option.

Strategies, substantial support, and international military intervention must be tied to a commitment from the HoR to a timetable for the new constitution and the holding of new elections under international supervision. Either approach would remove the threat of a radical Islamist state to create the preconditions for a lasting ceasefire and a negotiated solution of the conflict. The next step would encompass the pursuit of the strategic long-term goal: a successful transition process to a stable, democratic Libya (see strategic objective – option 1).

But unfortunately, experiences from other deeply divided countries suggest that **a real reconciliation in the near future is not realistic.**