

ISIS Libya foothold threatens EU

Written by Dr. Cyril Widdershoven
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International attention has been focused on the military confrontation in Syria and Iraq, where a Western-Arab coalition and the Russian led Syria-Iran coalition are cutting down the infrastructure of ISIS. The Russian military operation is strengthening Assad's overall position while bringing rebel forces and ISIS to the point of defeat. Meanwhile, a new Islamist extremist front has emerged; North Africa is on the brink of disaster.

While the West and Russia have focused on Syria after initial military successes in Iraq, it looks as if the world has forgotten to pay attention to the ongoing military build-up of extremist forces in Libya. The North African country is currently in ruins, politically and economically destabilized, but strategically of more importance to NATO than Syria. Over the last weeks, Russia has been talking to Libyan National Army (LNA) General Khalifah Haftar, as well as to Egypt and the UAE, about coordinating a possible military response to ISIS. A Russian led coalition would confront the West with a very unwanted situation on their direct borders.

In recent days 180 French special forces have arrived at the Benina airbase in Benghazi. According to Lieutenant Faraj Aqeim, head of the LNA's counter-terrorism special forces, the troops seem to be laying ground for an international military intervention against the Islamic State in Libya. First reactions by Libyan parties have been rather negative. Algeria and Tunisia also have stated that they are against any military intervention in Libya, as they fear that Libyan insurgents will retreat to their countries. The overall situation inside of Libya, and the role of ISIS, is fast shifting and still largely unclear. In the coming months Libya could become the new battleground between the West and ISIS, hopefully without Russian involvement.

ISIS has since 2014 built up a military capability in Libya, expanding its foothold in a country only hours away by boat from the soft underbelly of the European Union and NATO arena. The threat of a two-front war is clear but does not appear to have been taken into account by NATO or Western allies. After indicating a foothold in Egypt's Sinai region, the extremists have now gained strength and influence in Libya, the south of Tunisia and parts of Algeria. The impact of a new ISIS Caliphate 2.0 in North Africa should be assessed and military action is needed to quell this imminent threat to Europe's security and global trade.

The emergency of ISIS in Libya should not have come as a surprise. The extremist group set up strongholds in North Africa; one in Egypt's Sinai province, the other in and around the Libyan city of Sirte. The latter event could be seen as the first step of ISIS strategy to take over the

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whole of Libya in the coming months. The main reason for this endeavor is to establish a position well enough to provide a springboard for terrorism in the region and attacks on Sub-Saharan countries and even Southern Europe. The Libyan development is even more dangerous to Europe than Syria, as it is based on an open and already communicated strategy to attack Rome (aka the heart of Europe) as the Christian Nation. The collapse of the Libyan state, after the ill-fated and ill-decided removal of Muammar Qaddafi, has established a total power vacuum in which groups such as ISIS can flourish. The Libyan version of ISIS has quickly been able to exploit the lack of a functioning government and the decision by the West not to intervene quickly enough to restore peace and stability in the country. As in Iraq and Syria, especially around Raqqa, ISIS has been quickly able to set up military infrastructure, manned by Libyan and foreign fighters.

ISIS has taken control of large areas along a coastal strip in Libya, where thousands of its fighters have taken shelter. Sirte, the former powerbase of former Libyan leader Qaddafi, has become the so-called Libyan capital of ISIS. The coastal town has a wide range of highly valuable infrastructure, such as an international airport, oil installations, a seaport and major army bases. ISIS controls around 260 kilometers of Libya's coastal roads, which effectively cuts off Tripoli from Tobruk and Benghazi. In addition to its military plans to attack these cities in the coming period, it has also set its eyes on Libya's vast oil and gas operations, mainly in the south. At present, ISIS will be able, without real opposition, to take over Libya's oil regions around Sidr (oil port) and Ra's Lanuf (oil infrastructure). Its attacks on Libyan oil infrastructure have already crippled Libya's overall oil production and export capabilities. Since 2015, ISIS has attacked the oil and gas industry in southern Libya a number of times as part of an agreement with the southern tribes and ethnic groups. In 2016 however, it has upped the ante, especially after attacking the important oil terminal at Sidr after taking control of the nearby town of Bin Jawad.

On January 26, Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC), currently based in Tripoli, stated that the country has lost US\$60 billion in production and exports. The main reason has been strikes and outright attacks on oil ports and fields over the last three years. The damage caused by ISIS attacks in the last weeks of January 2016 has been tremendous. The destruction of the main part of the country's economy, which is Libya's oil and gas sector, will destabilize the existing government(s), one of the main strategies of ISIS and others. Even if current peace negotiations in Libya, supported by the EU, UN and USA, will be effective, a new government will have to restore not only the stability in the country, but also faces an uphill battle to restore the debilitated oil and gas infrastructure, which will take at least 5-8 years to be rebuilt. ISIS at present has been only involved in disabling oil and gas facilities, not occupying them. More attacks on Libya's already struggling oil sector are expected very soon. The current Libyan governmental forces and its opponents in the Western regions are not capable of blocking any ISIS operations at present. The government in Tobruk, which is supported by the international community, has tried to set up a Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG). The latter has however failed to protect the oil and gas facilities. At present, NOC is only capable of exporting around

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260,000 bpd of oil. At the same time, the future looks even bleaker, as ISIS operations have destroyed or taken over storage capacity at the oil ports of Es Sider and Ras Lanuf. These losses will constrain or even totally block future shipments. NOC reported that it has also lost 100,000 bpd of capacity due to the discontinuation or disruption of operations at the El Feel (El Fil, Elephant) and Sharara oil fields. In November 2015, Libyan oil production was still around 430,000 bpd. The military confrontation between the eastern and western governments was the main reason for a total blockade of the port of Zueitina in November 2015. In 2011, just before the removal of Muammar Qaddafi, Libya still produced around 1.6 million bpd, holding Africa's largest oil reserves. From being one of OPEC's leading producers, the country is now the smallest.

As has been shown before in Syria and Iraq, oil is one of the cornerstones on which ISIS has been able to set up its functional and still working economic-social and military infrastructure. ISIS, when taking full control of the Sirte region, will be interested in setting up its own revenue generating mercantilist economy. As in Syria and Iraq, this will include opening up illegal oil and gas producing and exporting infrastructure, on which it can base its own governmental system and social programs. Turning Libya's oil and gas resources into an asset will not be very difficult for ISIS. Its objective will either be to profit from selling oil to Western countries or to some of its supporters. The income it can generate from its current assets can be used to strengthen its overall position in Libya and the surrounding regions.

Next to establishing a strong infrastructure on and along the coastal regions, ISIS fighters and supporters have also been able to get a foot on the ground in the rest of the country. At present, the extremists are fighting both power brokers in the country and the existing Islamic rival groups, such as Al Qaeda. Current estimates indicate that the strength of the military ISIS forces has not yet been reaching Syria-Iraqi levels, but it could be around 4,500-6,000 fighters. In the last weeks, sources have indicated that the current military strength of ISIS in Libya is growing, partly based on the fact that ISIS via social media calls upon new recruits not to come to Raqqa but to head for Libya. At the same time, a growing amount of supporters, currently fighting in the Levant, is expected to head for Libya to leave the hunting grounds of the Caliphate, which have become a kill zone.

The current strength of ISIS in Libya is based on the support of groups such as the Salafist militia Ansar al Sharia. ISIS has grown its presence since 2014, when extremist fighters came from Syria to Libya. These groups were attracted by the first ISIS stronghold, set up in the Barqa Province (Cyrenaica), especially around Derna. The eastern region of Libya, already an Islamist stronghold in Qaddafi's time, supported from the start the ISIS groups, such as the fighters from the Al-Battar Battalion. In Derna, a group was set up called the Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam (Islamic Youth Shura Council), which declared its allegiance to ISIS in June 2014. In 2015, ISIS was thrown out of Derna and the surrounding region, by a coalition of the

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anti-Islamist Libyan army, which supports the secular Tobruk based government, and a local Al Qaeda-affiliated jihadist organization called the Shura Council of Mujahideen. This partial setback has however did not result in a defeat of ISIS, which re-emerged in and around Sirte. Since February 2015, the fighters have been able to expand their area substantially, and are now threatening the rest of the country.

Analogous to Iraq, where ISIS is supported by major groups of ex-Ba'ath loyalists and military cadres, Libyan support is given by ex-Qaddafi loyalists, which have been thrown out of power and are now looking to return to Libya's political forefront. While ISIS is not yet a real major power broker in vast areas of Libya, the extremists are likely to put in place a network of affiliated supporters to slowly merge vast areas or whole regions. Even though Libya's current two main fighting parties (Tobruk, Tripoli) have reached an agreement to form a national government, ISIS is still able to use the current unstable situation and power vacuum to its advantage.

A direct military confrontation between the new Libyan government and ISIS is not to be expected soon. ISIS will not take these parties on in a direct military confrontation. However, the proven concept, which was tried and perfected in Iraq and Syria, of carrying out attacks in the major cities, such as the attacks against the Corinthia Hotel and the Police Academy in Tripoli and Tobruk, will destabilize any future government. A possible expansion of ISIS territory is to be expected in that case.

When looking at the Western region of Libya, the situation is very diffuse. The impact of ISIS operations is not yet really clear. Worrying however is the fact that ISIS is already able and willing to confront Western powers and Libyan security. Reports from the ground indicate that ISIS is preparing for new operations in the coming weeks. Major support for ISIS is also coming in from southern Tunisia, Mali, Niger, Algeria and Morocco.

Under cover of the existing optimism in the Western media about the stability and progress made after the Arab Spring in Tunisia, ISIS has been building up its influence in southern Tunisia. For groups such as ISIS a power base in southern Tunisia is very attractive. The weak socio-economic structures in southern Tunisia provide an opportunity, while at the same time there are attractive Western targets in the north of the country, such as in Tunis or Sousse. ISIS openly has claimed responsibility for the attacks on the Bardo Museum, the presidential guard in Tunis, and British tourists on the beach of Sousse, without having to be afraid of a military reaction from the Tunisian government. Secondly, which has not really been addressed in most media assessments, Tunisia has been, and still is, delivering the largest volumes of recruits for ISIS in Syria, Iraq and also Libya.

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Another worrying development has been reported recently. ISIS fighters from Libya are moving towards Niger and Chad. Large groups of ISIS jihadists have left their bases in Libya, fearing attack by Western airstrikes, to form new ISIS strongholds in Sub-Saharan Africa. As the Sahel borders are very open with military control almost non-existent, the movement of rebel forces is not under threat at all at present. Niger armed forces representatives have already stated that ISIS is moving assets toward Southern Libya. If ISIS will be able to move without any resistance part of its forces to the latter areas, the whole Sahel region will be under pressure. ISIS targets will then include current UN-Western backed military peace operations in Mali, Southern Sudan and other countries. The possibility that ISIS and Al Qaeda forces could join operations should also not be underestimated. Since the French intervention in Mali (2012), Al Qaeda fighters are roaming around the region.

The militant challenge in the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa is growing, still not understood fully by politicians in the West it seems. If ISIS could establish a viable and working infrastructure link between the south of Libya and its supporters in Nigeria (Boko Haram), other countries such as Niger and Chad will be next in line to be targeted. At present, ISIS linked Boko Haram and others are already claiming attacks, such as the bomb attack on a market in Lake Chad in December 2015. An official of Chad's Special Antiterrorism Group stated that they fear that ISIS will enter the country very soon. Chad is on the target list of ISIS and Al Qaeda, especially after that the country assisted in NATO airstrikes in 2011 in Libya.

The cooperation between ISIS Libya and the so-called Sinai Province of ISIS poses a threat to Egypt's security. A possible expansion of the arms deliveries and support by ISIS Libya via Sudan to the Sinai is to be expected if the Libyan situation worsens. Such a situation can't be allowed by Egypt. Cairo has already been actively engaged in Libya's ongoing internal strife for years. After the beheading of Egyptian Copts by ISIS in Libya, Egyptian fighter-planes have been involved in sorties against ISIS. Gulf Arab country UAE also has already been active in Libya. Still, the current situation shows no real increased military activity by any Arab country in and around Libya.

In the coming weeks, the Western powers and its Arab allies will have to decide what to do with the growing strength of ISIS in Libya. Western forces, currently already stretched to the utmost, due to ongoing operations in Syria, Iraq, and Eastern Europe (to block possible Russian operations in Ukraine and Baltics), are not capable of setting up the fighting force needed to quell the threat. The non-existent Arab coalition also is not yet able to hit them hard. Countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and even the eastern government in Libya, however are getting more and more worried about the impact of a re-emerging Libyan Caliphate, especially if Syria-Iraq is becoming a killing zone for ISIS. The role of the US is still unclear. Currently the

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overall focus is on Syria, where Washington is in an indirect power battle with Russia, and seems to be losing its grip on the overall situation. Washington, and its European allies, do not have a comprehensive response in place to deal with Libya at the same time.

The danger exists that based on the current situation and developments, Europe will be confronted by a new refugee situation, in which Libya will become the new “Syria”. In the coming weeks, it can be expected that an increased amount of refugees (legitimate and economic) will be trying to enter the EU via Italy, shipped from the shores of Libya. A further spreading of the military forces of NATO would reveal the current incapability of the Western military alliance to deal with a three-front war (Ukraine-Baltic, Syria and Libya). The NATO forces are currently spread so much that they are not able to put on the ground new forces to counter or openly attack existing threats. If new forces are needed in Libya it will depend on the US.

For the short term, intervention will need to be assessed and discussed in full. Two options remain; one is a full-scale Western intervention, not only airstrikes but also getting boots on the ground. This option is still seen by most Western politicians as too high risk, as casualties are going to be significant. European countries are in general not at all willing to take this step, so boots will need to come from a coalition of the willing, possibly including US-France-Italy. Other European countries will be only willing to support a political strategy, supported by airpower. This approach, based on normal military analysis will not be effective enough to remove the existing threat of ISIS and other jihadist movements in the country. The military capabilities of the current two political factions in Libya, which have agreed now to form a national government, are for sure not able to remove the battle hardened jihadist fighters and former Qaddafi supporters.

The other option, as is currently also brewing for Syria, is a Pan-Arab approach, in which, based on its regional power position, Egypt will need to take the lead. This option, for some the best approach, will be taking the fight currently being fought in the Sinai, south of Algeria and Tunisia, to the streets of Sirte. An Arab coalition could be the possible solution to the ISIS threat, as it means no real cultural-religious conflict will be emerging from Arab soldiers fighting Arab-Islamic jihadists. It also could mean an end to the creeping insurgencies in Libya’s neighboring countries, as an end to ISIS in Libya will remove the support for vast parts of these movements at the same time.

The worst case scenario also needs to be addressed by Washington and Brussels. No intervention in Libya, a full focus on the Syria conundrum, with a possible confrontation with Russia, could lead to a total disintegration of Western interests in the Middle East, North Africa

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and the Sahel region. An unresolved situation in Syria, leaving Assad, backed by Moscow, to regain his former position as the main power broker, will stir bad blood in most other Arab countries. Russia's current effective but indiscriminate military strategy is already taking its toll on views in the Arab population. The current hold-back approach by Washington, backed by Obama, is not seen as a functional Western approach. Most Arab countries (MENA) have become wary of Washington's interests and capabilities to deal with threats to their own regimes. Another low-key strategy towards Libya will not be taken lightly. Europe's security is also at risk, as Libya's instability will increase the overall refugee crisis even more. It is time to learn from history. Sometimes a hard military approach is needed before soft policies (democracy) are to be addressed. Putin's interventionist strategies are not liked by most Arab countries, but the average Arab on the street likes a strong leader. Moscow's current Middle East strategy could also work for North Africa. Algeria, Libya and Egypt are after all former allies of the Soviet Union; some links still exist. Major arms deals have already been published between Egypt and Russia, while others (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Algeria, Israel) are being discussed in full. A spreading of Russian involvement on the southern shore of the Mediterranean should not be allowed, as it increases the stranglehold of Russian influence even further. ISIS will then be just a precursor for more.

Dr. Cyril Widdershoven is owner of Mediterranean Energy Political Risk Consultancy, and member of several US-GCC based consultancies, focusing on defense-security and oil/gas related geopolitical issues. He also advises on M&A, critical risks issues and critical infrastructure security.