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It's 'violence as usual' in Libya



During the last few weeks, it was “violence as usual” in Libya. The French Embassy in Tripoli was bombed. Police stations were attacked in Benghazi. A car explosion, near a hospital in Benghazi, killed at least 10 people and injured many more.

As usual, also, foreigners were running for cover. Embassies announced once more a reduction in the number of their employees. Warnings were issued against “non-essential travel” to east, west and south of Libya. Oil companies also reduced their personnel “because of the circumstances”.

This time around, there was unprecedented measures. The U.S. shifted scores of U.S. Marines and assault aircraft from the rapid response force of the Moron Air Base (in Spain), to Sigonella, Italy.

A Pentagon's spokesman called the transfer “a precautionary measure” with no necessary links to developments in Libya. Some in the U.S. media, however, dubbed the transferred U.S. Marine unit the “Benghazi Unit”, speculating that it was part of a preemptive move by the Pentagon, just in case there was another September 11th 2012-type terrorist attack on US interests in Libya.

The wages of insecurity

Both events and reactions point to the chronic security problem in Libya. Solving this problem is essential for Libyans themselves.

“There are an estimated 500 militias and armed groups across Libya with an estimated 250,000 men under arms outside of government control,” recently reported UPI from Tripoli. Militias, still running the show in many regions, have their own political and tribal agendas.

They recently held siege to various ministries in Tripoli until the General National Congress passed a law excluding civil servants who had served under Qaddafi from holding public office for the next 10 years.

Militias are no substitute to regular forces, which alone could ensure the safety of citizens and officials in midst of a delicate transition period. Politicians, security officers, and judges feel they are in harm's way. The just-released International Legal Assistance Consortium report claims that 8,000 are still held "without charges of representation." It explains that "the absence of security for justice sector personnel has led judges and prosecutors to indefinitely delay the processing of detainees' cases."

Insecurity is currently hampering the implementation of projects, which means lost employment and revenue, especially with the disruption of energy production. The Zueitina oil terminal, southwest of Benghazi, was shut down a few days ago as protesters blocked access to it for the second time in six months. (Similar disruption of oil installations has cost the country about \$1 billion over the last five months, according to Oil Minister Abdelbari al-Arusi).

The April attack on the French embassy has raised alarm in many capitals because of its potential regional fallouts. Jason Pack, president of Libya-Analysis.com and Karim Mezran, senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, argue that "the French Embassy attack may prove to be the start of a trend, in which case Libyan -- and by extension North African -- instability would become a permanent status quo. The crisis in Mali and the growing instability in Algeria -- and most recently Tunisia -- offer clear evidence in support of this conjecture."

The common wisdom during the debate about the war in Mali (itself one of the fallouts of the Libyan war), was that US security was not at stake. With so many blowbacks and ripple effects, many people today think otherwise. Christopher S. Chivvis, a researcher at the RAND corporation, believes: "Because of its proximity to Libya's shores, Europe would pay the price of a collapse first. But the U.S. interest in a stable North Africa that is not a haven for radical militancy would also take a hit."

What's the world to do?

Although the deterioration of the situation in Libya was quick and obvious to all, no peace-time coalition matched the war coalition which brought down Gadhafi. The diagnosis of most observers, east and west, has been in many cases stark. Nawaf Obaid, a Saudi researcher at Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, wrote in a recent report that "Libya has been thrown into chaos. Central authority has been decimated, and the new government is unable to reassert its authority over any significant section of the country". His prognosis was dire: "At present, the survivability of Libya in its present form over the next decade is highly in doubt," he says.

In recent months, Western response to Libya's turbulence has become so predictable that it begged the question whether the "trouble-makers" knew which buttons to push in order to discourage the international community from helping the Libyan government put its house in order. In the case of the United States, the over-politicized debate over Benghazi has further heightened the aversion to risk-taking in Libya. Brian Katulis and Peter Juul, of the Center for American Progress, argue that "The United States and its partners are now stuck in a vicious circle: They cannot offer requisite levels of assistance to the Libyan government because they are unwilling to risk the poor security situation, and

What is required of the West in the case of Libya is obviously not an Iraq-type military intervention. Libyans are still traumatized by the effects of the NATO-led campaign against Gadhafi. Last April when Senator John McCain visited Libya, Libyan Prime Minister Ali Zidan, felt compelled to deny social media rumors that NATO will be launching new attacks in Libya. Although very welcoming of Western assistance, the Libyan population will frown just at the thought of a foreign military campaign on their soil.

The anti-colonialist mindset that permeates North Africa would make any outside occupation unthinkable. Western powers themselves face enormous cash problems. They have their hands full with current costly campaigns in Afghanistan and Mali, and with problems in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere.

Even a drone strategy will be difficult to envision, outside the surveillance mode. Cambridge researcher Jason Pack, former leader of the Islamic Fighting Group Noman Benotman, and Libya.com researcher Haley Cook think: "The logic of drone strikes to disturb terrorists in this area holds a certain appeal for an administration that has decimated al-Qaeda leadership in the Af-Pak region, yet it is the wrong policy choice."

Most experts believe an international program, limited in time and scope, with a focus on training, is needed to help Libyans in the task of re-building the security apparatus and state institutions. It could simply expand upon the type of assistance agreed upon by the international community, last February.

Two plans, the National Security Development Plan and the Justice and Rule of Law Development Plan, are scheduled to be implemented in Libya. The European Union will be providing Border security support to Libya starting in June.

Jason Pack, Noman Benotman, and Haley Cook argue that "Libya urgently needs international assistance in building its institutions, especially the basic machinery of government and security". This option is all the more viable that Libyans can easily foot the bill for such an effort. Arab war-coalition partners will probably pitch in as well.

Libya's northwestern neighbor

As they struggle against the Al-Qaeda threat, Tunisian security agencies will depend a lot on Libya's ability to rebuild its security apparatus. On May 8, Tunisian authorities arrested a Libyan carrying 150 kg of explosives, on a fishing boat. It was not the first instance of arms and explosives being smuggled out of Libya, to Tunisia, Egypt, Mali or even Gaza. There were 10 Tunisian Jihadists among the 40-strong squad which attacked the In Eminas gas plant in January, after reportedly crossing into Algeria from Libya. Sunday, when Tunisian security forces clashed with "Ansar al-Shariah" Jihadists, Libya's "Ansar al-Shariha" militants were quick to express solidarity with fellow Tunisian radicals.

A continued crack-down by the Ennahda-led government on Al-Qaeda fighters could help Libya better secure its borders. Ideally, once greater stabilization and security materialize in both countries, a mutually-reinforcing dynamic of development and growth could help meet the demands of the ambitious but frustrated young populations. Lack of jobs currently drives unemployed youths to smuggling. Across the Tunisian-Libyan border, traffickers take advantage of the difference between fuel prices in both countries.

Libyan Oil Minister Abdelbari al-Arusi announced this month the decision of his government to do away with fuel subsidies by 2016.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates over 14 percent of Libya's budget or about \$7 billion serve to subsidize food and fuel, which the government says encourage trans-border smuggling.

Libya's decision is probably an unavoidable step towards reforming its subsidy policies. The two countries will hopefully think, during the three year-period preceding the end of subsidies, of revenue-alternatives for the social groups who live off smuggling. But before engaging a process of growth and recovery, Libya needs to ensure its security and territorial integrity. By doing so, it will be definitely ensuring that of its neighbors as well.

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