

# The Battle for Benghazi

## The Limits of Stabilization by Military Means

Nizar Sarieldin

After being on the sidelines of the transition process for more than two years, Benghazi has been turned into a major battlefield over the past nine months for the competing parties in Libya. Yet, even a victory by the forces fighting on behalf of the government of Tobruk over Islamist forces backed by the rival administration in Tripoli is unlikely to stabilize the situation in eastern Libya, let alone solve the deep crisis that has all but ended the political process since summer 2014. Rather, it is liable to lead to increasing competition – and perhaps violent conflict – among the different elements of the fragile coalition now backing the Tobruk government as well as intensify momentum leading toward the breakup of Libya as a unitary state. The fight for Benghazi therefore illustrates the limits of stabilization by military means. Germany and its European partners should support a unity government, which the current talks in Geneva are aimed at. They should also desist from contributing to a further escalation by supporting actors who push for military solutions.

In the fall of 2014, forces of the so-called Libyan National Army (LNA), under the command of General Khalifa Haftar, succeeded in pushing Islamist and jihadist forces out of much of Benghazi – Libya's second city and the main urban hub of the eastern region. Although the conflict there is currently at a stalemate, it appears likely that Haftar's forces, which are nominally acting on behalf of the internationally recognized Libyan government of Tobruk (but are actually based in Bayda), will be able to consolidate their hold over the city. Some factions in the Bayda government are already pushing to extend the campaign and launch an assault on the Islamist strong-

hold of Darna, located halfway between the two eastern cities. At the same time, the conflict has driven Islamists in the east into an ever-closer alliance with the rival government in Tripoli, which is liable to lead to a further radicalization of the leadership in the country's capital. After being on the sidelines of Libyan politics for the first two years of the transformation process, Benghazi has thus been turned into a battleground mirroring the larger confrontation in the country.

### Roots of the Struggle

Since the end of 2011, Benghazi has suffered from a political vacuum and a deteriorating

*Nizar Sarieldin is a fellow in the project "Elite change and new social mobilization in the Arab world" realized by the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP). The project is funded by the German Foreign Office in the framework of the transformation partnerships with the Arab World and the Robert Bosch Stiftung. It cooperates with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the Ph.D. grant programs of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung and the Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung.*

SWP Comments 8  
February 2015

security situation. The persistent failure of Libya's new rulers to reestablish military or police forces capable of reinforcing state control has undermined the authority of successive governments. Instead, new political bodies such as the National Transitional Council (NTC) and the General National Congress (GNC) and its successive governments have only aggravated the situation by choosing to invest in a multitude of armed non-state actors with different – and often contradictory – mandates.

Indeed, already at the start of 2012, the city had witnessed large-scale attacks by various militias on state security forces' facilities, army sites, and on foreign diplomatic missions, which eventually resulted in the evacuation of all foreign representations. The violence and lawlessness have been attributed to groups seeking to leverage their role in the revolution for political or financial advantage. By the end of the 2011 civil war, many of the city's militias had taken over – at times by force – the former regime's arms stocks and appropriated its military bases, using them partly as a prison and as investigation offices. For example, the Zintan Martyrs Brigade took over a camp of the Air Force unit in the city. They then pressured the government to authorize these takeovers.

In reaction, the first post-revolutionary government under interim Prime Minister Abdurrahim El-Keib (in office from November 2011 to November 2012) approved the creation of two new security forces from the ranks of the militias, among them the two major Islamist and jihadist ones. First, on 22 February 2012, the Supreme Security Committee was established. Acting under the Interior Ministry, it was given a one-year mandate to establish security in the city. Second, on 8 August 2012 came the formation of the Libya Shield Forces (LSF), which was to be an interim force aimed at integrating the rebels into the army, acting under the Defense Ministry. Yet, many saw these new formations as an attempt by the revolutionary and Islamist militias to replace the police and army. With this,

not only were these two militias allowed to remain in Benghazi, they were also sanctioned to operate on behalf of the state.

These decrees ignited the conflict between revolutionary and Islamist militias on the one side and remnants of the former Libyan Army on the other. In September 2012, following the attack on the US diplomatic compound in Benghazi by Islamist militias, which resulted in the killing of US Ambassador Christopher Stevens, citizens called for a popular uprising against the militias in the city, and for the dissolution of any armed force that would not integrate into the country's army. The results were bloody clashes, with 11 people killed on both sides, marking a decisive turning point in Benghazi's internal dynamics. The militias, once popular and respected for their fight against the Qaddafi regime, came to be seen as a threat to the city's future.

In parallel, a series of assassinations targeted ex-Qaddafi army figures, which seemed to be a recurrence of the killing of General Abd al-Fattah Younis in July 2011, the chief of staff of the NTC, which was the de facto government during the 2011 uprising. The assassination campaign accelerated at a steady pace during 2012 and 2013 and reached a peak of some 50 people – from military figures to activists and ordinary citizens – every month in early 2014. Benghazi scored the highest number of violent deaths in all of Libya (in 2014: 1,471, out of a country tally of 2,825), although no suspects were identified or arrested. Judiciary institutions were also attacked, causing the courts to suspend work.

Indeed, it seems that the targeting of the judiciary was aimed at paralyzing the state institutions and later replacing them with Sharia courts. Even though there is no definite evidence that Islamists were behind the violence, many observers have suggested that these assassinations have been driven by revenge, or with the aim of establishing parallel army and police forces and then replacing the state institutions might have been the real motive. Violence against the security apparatus can also be under-

stood against the background of the history of hostility between Islamists and army officers, which dates back to the 1990s, when the Qaddafi regime used the army to mete out brutal repression against the Islamists.

Hence, the rising hostility toward the Islamist and revolutionary militias among the population, the absence of an effective state security apparatus, and the rise in the levels of violence and clashes all prepared the ground for “Operation Dignity” (Karama), launched by General Haftar in May 2014, with the declared intention of waging “war on terrorism” in Benghazi and restoring security to the city.

### **Misrata-Islamists Alliance**

Haftar’s offensive occurred at a point in time when the political transition in Libya was already on the verge of breaking down. While an alliance formed between powerful militias based in Libya’s third largest city (Misrata) and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB)-affiliated Justice and Construction party – which insisted that the tenure of the GNC and the government, which it dominated, would not end in February 2014, as claimed by the National Forces Alliance (NFA) – the latter pushed for immediate elections and began drawing massive levels of popular support, in particular in Tripoli.

With the onset of the Karama campaign, an increasing number of army units declared loyalty to Haftar. The Al-Qaqaa and Al-Sawa’iq militias from Zintan – foes of the Misrata militias – issued an ultimatum, giving GNC members five hours to evacuate the premises, tender their resignations, and transfer authority to the Supreme Court. The Islamists regarded such steps as an attempt to stage what they called “the Egyptian scenario” in Libya, i.e., a coup. The Misrata-led alliance saw its hitherto clear military superiority increasingly challenged and finally agreed to hold elections for a new House of Representatives (HoR) at the end of June 2014. Yet, after suffering a defeat in the elections, they launched their own military operation under the title “Libya Dawn”

and took control of the capital, which forced the newly elected HoR to flee for the safety of Tobruk near the Egyptian border.

In Benghazi, the immediate result of Haftar’s assault was that revolutionary and Islamist militias set their differences aside and united under the umbrella of the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC). This council later fragmented into three groups, which, however, upheld their strong coordination within the BRSC. Furthermore, as the crisis on the national level escalated, the Misrata-led alliance came to see the BRSC as a useful ally that would tie down its opponents’ forces, which may have otherwise impeded its own move to consolidate military control over the capital. It therefore provided funding and arms to the Benghazi factions. With joined forces and Misrata’s backing, the BRSC initially succeeded in repelling the attack and driving Haftar’s forces out of most of the city by the end of July. Yet, in October 2014, a second offensive by Haftar – now supported by groups of fighters recruited from the local population – succeeded in dislodging the BRSC from much of the city.

### **Benghazi Dynamics**

Thus far, the conflict in Benghazi has been a complex power struggle over legitimacy of representation. It has manifested itself in two main camps, with a variety of diverging interests among the different players of these camps. Although neither of the two camps rejects Sharia rule, the anti-Islamist camp would give a subordinate role to religious authorities in what they call a civil state. Yet, within the Karama coalition, there are divergencies with regard to a federal vs. a unitary state in Libya.

Tribal orientations have not played a major role in this to date. However, the propaganda of both sides has attempted to exploit tribal dynamics to whip up support. In reality, neither commanders nor fighters on either side are exclusively affiliated to specific tribal groups, but rather are recruited from a diverse range of the city’s

tribes. The city is a hodgepodge of tribal groups, with almost half the tribes being of western origins and the rest stemming from Bedouin tribes from the east. However, historically, families of Misratan origin have dominated trade and business in the city. Also, those families that have left the city fled due to their political orientations rather than tribal territorial logic. Supporters of the Islamists and revolutionaries leave areas controlled by Haftar for Misrata and Tripoli, whereas those who move away from areas ruled by the Islamists take refuge in the eastern coastal cities controlled by Haftar's allies.

Yet, media based in Misrata or sympathetic to the political positions of its leadership have highlighted reports of attacks against Misratan families affiliated with Islamists and the revolutionary camp. Haftar's propaganda, mainly carried by the federalists, in turn has been emphasizing the Misratan roots of Islamist fighters and the businessmen supporting them, and has therefore called on Misratans to leave Benghazi and the eastern region. Thus, both sides have stressed the tribal component in the struggle. A prolonged conflict in Benghazi is therefore certain to deepen regional and tribal divisions between the east and the west of Libya. This plays into the hands of those pushing for a federalization of the country, or even its breakup into two or more sovereign units – a trend that is liable to hasten the spiral of violence.

Most importantly, the violence against families and individuals that has been carried out by both rival forces has already led to further polarization. It is set to increase the rifts in Benghazi's social fabric and radicalize society – leaving little chance for stabilization.

### **Revolutionary and Islamist Forces**

Haftar's anti-Islamist campaign in Benghazi urged the eight major militias in the city to set aside their ideological differences and political rivalries and to combine their firepower into a single coalition, the BRSC, estab-

lished on 20 June 2014. In essence, there are three different groups in the anti-Haftar camp: the Islamic-leaning, the jihadist, and revolutionaries with mixed ideological leanings.

Besides Ansar al-Sharia (AS), the backbone of the Islamist and revolutionary forces in Benghazi is made up of LSF 1, 2, and 7. The LSF were set up as a temporary vehicle for integrating former rebel fighters into a cohesive national force, but it has clashed with other government-sponsored forces, such as Saiqa, the Special Forces unit of the Libyan Army, over control. By the end of 2013, the LSF had fragmented again into its components. In general, the alliance is hobbled by a chaotic chain of command and the absence of well-funded structures. Its strength stems mainly from its ideological zeal as well as the combat experience and strategic capabilities that many of its fighters gained during the conflicts in Mali and Syria.

AS, whose real stronghold is in the town of Darna, some 300 km to the east of Benghazi, is explicitly cooperating with the LSF and seeking to use the LSF's military weight to establish an Islamic state in Benghazi. It is also using the BRSC as a front, since many residents of Benghazi reject AS due to its ideological orientation and the declared opposition of its former leader Mohamed al-Zahawi to a democratic state, security institutions, and the political process as such.

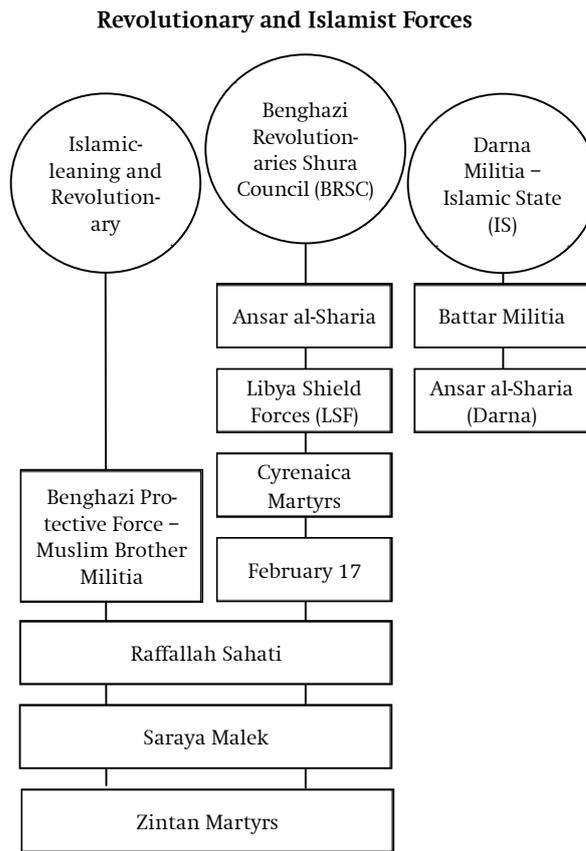
Although the BRSC groups are united in their goal to prevent Haftar from taking over the city, there are clear differences in the tactics they apply. AS and other jihadis, such as the Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam, which has declared its allegiance to the Islamic State leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, have espoused suicide bombings, car bombs, and the beheading of opponents, whereas other militias have followed more conventional tactics of guerrilla combat.

The war in Benghazi has resulted in the radicalization of formerly non-ideological groups. This is clearly what happened with Wissam Bin Hamid, a prominent commander with great personal authority. Hamid developed from a simple car mechanic to a

rebel commander in 2011, to a leader of the Islamist-affiliated LSF, and then to a leader of the jihadist-oriented coalition of rebel militias in the beginning of 2014. Today, he heads the BRSC. His adoption of the jihadist narrative was a result of AS indoctrination of him and his fighters, as the relationship between AS and Hamid has been close since the 2011 revolution.

Furthermore, although there are ideological differences between the jihadists in Benghazi and Darna and the MB-affiliated parties in Misrata and Tripoli, confronting a common enemy in the forces of Haftar and the Tobruk-based government means that Libyan Islamists might increasingly be converging into a homogeneous bloc that is likely to be ever more difficult to engage with. Already, the prime minister of the non-recognized Tripoli-based government, Omar al-Hassi, is on record calling AS a “simple, beautiful, friendly idea.”

Within the BRSC, dozens of fighters from the AS stronghold of Darna are known to have joined the struggle in Benghazi. However, their form of organization and command chain are not clear since the BRSC was squeezed out of much of the city, while few BRSC-controlled pockets still exist in some Benghazi neighborhoods. The position of the BRSC with regard to AS remains unclear since the UN Security Council blacklisted the group on 19 November 2014, which was followed by a call for actors from within the Misrata alliance to dissolve the brigade. It is plausible that the BRSC will go along with this position and denounce AS in public while continuing to harbor them for the sake of their common interest in the battle over Benghazi. Similarly, the Tripoli government can also be expected not only to continue its political support for AS as a major element of the BRSC, but also to cooperate with the jihadists in Darna in order to maintain a firm base in the east. This would allow it to simultaneously fight Haftar and the Tobruk-based government, preventing either of them from striking out further west.



To sum up, all these coalitions started out as tactical and temporary measures but have led to a convergence of ideological positions over time among many of the fighters. Alliances throughout the country are mostly forged and maintained against common enemies, and are hence subject to change as the balance of power and tactical interests shift. Group loyalties in Libya are primarily to factional commanders of different political persuasions or ideologies rather than to the state.

The external support that the BRSC receives also varies from one group to another. Qatar is apparently channeling money and weapons through Sudan to the Misrata-led operation Libya Dawn. Turkey has stronger affiliations with the Libyan MB and hosts many of its members. Meetings of GNC representatives with Turkish officials are being held in Turkey, and fighters from Misrata’s Libya Dawn and from the BRSC openly travel there for medical treatment.

## Haftar's Allies

Gen. Khalifa Haftar, 72, lived for 20 years in exile in the United States after leading a failed rebellion against Qaddafi from 1987 to 1990. Before that, he served in the Libyan Army under Qaddafi and had even participated in the 1969 coup that brought Qaddafi to power. In 2011, he returned to Libya to join the revolution and emerged as one of the prominent commanders on the side of the rebels. He was appointed as a field commander by the NTC. During his retirement, he first took a stance against the Tripoli government and the Chief of Staff in a televised statement on 14 February 2014. He also proposed a five-point plan to rescue the nation: the suspension of the GNC and the government, and the establishment of a presidential committee and a defense council, which he intended to head. He did not receive significant support though.

Three months later, Haftar exploited the chaos and tension in Tripoli, where the GNC was pressured to dissolve and where tension between Zintani and Misratan militias was on the rise: He launched air and ground assaults against Islamist and revolutionary militias in Benghazi under Operation Dignity. In doing so, he formed a rival army leadership (the General Leadership of the Libyan National Army) against the Chief of General Staff of the Libyan Army, and thus triggered the split of state institutions. He won the support of politicians, diplomats, army units, and tribes that wanted him to impose order and rein in the country's rebellious armed groups. The change in support for Haftar – from his first attempt in February to the second in May – suggests that although many refused to support his personal political ambitions, they approved of his offensive against the extremist militias, which they perceived as a real threat.

There are three main blocs that joined Haftar's fight. First, there were a number of defectors from Libyan Army and police units, who were enraged over the government's silence on the assassinations against members of the army and angry about their forced retirement. Although they had been

removed because they had reached retirement age, they saw it as another attempt to replace them with Islamist and revolutionary forces by the GNC. Out of 400 officers who had been forcibly retired, 129 declared their support to Haftar and were later reinstated by the newly elected parliament.

Second, the Benghazi-based Saiqa Forces, as well as Air Force units in the east, also lent support to Haftar. These were a great military asset, especially since the span of control of Haftar's LNA was limited, as its units are largely marked by tribal and regional loyalties, such as to the al-Obeidat and al-Barasa. It is worth noting here, that the Saiqa units, although they fight under Haftar's command, are considered loyal to Abdullah al-Thini, a former army commander and the prime minister of the Tobruk government.

Third, the Barqa Supreme Military Council is an alliance of tribal armed groups based in different eastern cities that see control over Benghazi as being a key step in realizing their federalist ambitions.

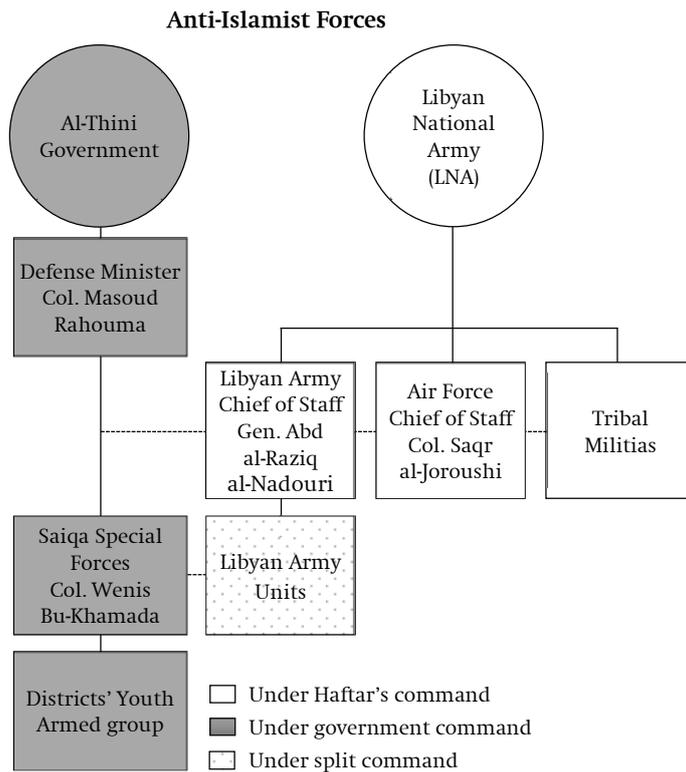
Besides these armed units, Operation Dignity is supported by ordinary residents of Benghazi who turned to armed struggle and formed the so-called Shabab al-Manatiq (literary "Districts' Youth"). When the military offensive started, local youths in civilian clothes attacked checkpoints set up by the BRSC. These groups may pose a future risk to stability, as they will eventually demand a political reward for their role, which may potentially put at risk exactly what Haftar's campaign is aiming to achieve.

The so-called LNA that Haftar controls began with small units of the Libyan Army, but since then it controls all the units and bases in the eastern region, especially after coopting Chief of Staff Abd al-Raziq al-Nadouri. On the political level, Haftar's forces have been officially endorsed by the internationally recognized HoR in Tobruk. They have merged, at least partially, with the Libyan Army under a mandate from the parliament. Yet, political actors in Tobruk are evidently harboring second thoughts about the ambitions of the general. Rela-

tions remain ambivalent with al-Thini, who had previously accused Haftar of trying to stage a coup. The distrust between the two men is still palpable, as both claim ownership of the “war on terrorism” in the country. Furthermore, the lingering bad blood between al-Thini and Haftar is a sign of a rift between top commanders in the Libyan Army. On 5 January 2015, Chief of Staff al-Nadouri ordered the arrest of Col. Masoud Rahouma, the acting defense minister in al-Thini’s government, over an arms shipment that was going to the Saiqa force without the knowledge of the Chief of Staff or Haftar. Although Saiqa is part of the Karama campaign, they have complained to the government that Haftar is not providing its units with enough ammunition, leading to the loss of fighters.

A proposal advanced by Haftar and his commanders to unify the military leadership against the BRSC by forming a Supreme Military Council, to be headed by Haftar himself, further fueled suspicions and fell flat due to resistance from inside the HoR. Lawmakers were apparently concerned that such a new military body might soon seek to sideline the elected parliament, in particular if it were to be headed by Haftar, who has already insinuated that he might take charge if the HoR proved incapable of performing its duties. Furthermore, after the decision of the HoR to reinstate 129 officers who had been retired by the GNC, many fear that Haftar will now feel emboldened to resist any further attempts at civilian oversight.

Another potential crack in the anti-Islamist camp emerged in December 2014. This is when the NFA bloc, HoR members from the east, and several members of the al-Obeidat tribe (one of the major eastern tribes, with lands extending from the Egyptian border to Tobruk and the highlands atop Darna) encouraged Major General Suleiman Mahmoud al-Obeidi – a senior commander who had likewise been forcibly retired by the GNC – to propose an offensive in Darna, the jihadist stronghold of the eastern region. Since al-Obeidi had previously



refused to endorse Haftar, the initiative was interpreted as an attempt to prop up additional military figures that would undermine Haftar’s claim to leadership and balance the power he had been assembling. The political wrangling in the background may also explain the slow advancement of military operations in Benghazi as Haftar attempts to weaken cohesion among Saiqa forces, which are said to be the least loyal to him.

On the regional level, Egypt, which views the presence of hardline extremists near its western border as a direct national security threat, has deepened its involvement and willingness to offer military support to Haftar through the Tobruk-based government. Egypt also fears what it sees as a mounting threat as a result of the cooperation and alignment of Libya’s MB with jihadist networks that had beheaded Egyptian workers. In general, Egypt has supported the idea that toppling MB or Islamist rule would require forming a military coalition with Haftar. Also, competition between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar led to continued support of both states to opposing sides, with Qatar supporting Mis-

rata and the Islamists, and the UAE supporting the anti-Islamist current.

Although what is left of the HoR (some 125 members) is, for now, united in its support for the LNA and Operation Dignity, before long the different priorities of the political factions will probably lead to realignments of alliances and differences that have the potential to generate conflict and further violence. In particular, the NFA and Haftar on the one side and the federalists and eastern tribes on the other are likely to work at cross-purposes: Although the former are striving to reassert their position within the framework of a unitarian Libyan state, they do not agree on national politics, and the latter have no interest in pursuing war in the western region. Rather, consolidation of the rival government in Tripoli and a progressive establishment of parallel administrative structures would serve their purpose of creating a separate state.

The most obvious example of the potential conflict of this configuration thus far was the public quarrel between Haftar's deputy, Col. Saqr al-Joroushi, and the commander of the so-called Petroleum Defense Guards, Ibrahim Jadhnan, who set up the Cyrenaica Political Bureau in 2013 and secured control of the eastern oil ports. Amid the attacks by the Misrata-led Libya Dawn to seize control of the oil ports, Joroushi directed a verbal attack against his nominal ally Jadhnan, calling him a "terrorist." The intolerance of the LNA vis-à-vis groups that do not submit to its command demonstrates the urge to exert maximum control over fragmented forces, which is liable to lead to multiple violent conflicts with local and regional powers and stakeholders.

## Conclusion

Haftar's campaign in Benghazi and beyond clearly shows the limits of an approach that seeks stabilization through military means. Empowering and arming additional non-state actors – such as the Districts' Youth, the federalists, or discontented former secu-

rity personnel – is liable to further increase the challenges of (re)establishing any form of central state control. Also, even if the campaign were to be successful in its primary goal of rolling back and containing jihadist and revolutionary militias, divergent interests and suspicion over potential political ambitions of its commander are likely to lead to the fracturing of the fragile alliance that is currently sustaining the Tobruk-led government. In addition, the example of the BRSC serves to show that increased military pressure will prompt groups with different degrees of ideological commitment to close ranks and converge on the more radical positions. It might also further consolidate the alliance between these groups and the Tripoli-based government and is liable to empower the most radical currents in the latter. Thus, the prospects of restoring the political process on the central state level will become even more remote, and the already strong momentum for the break-up of the country will be further reinforced. To the degree that external actors (such as Egypt, the UAE, or Western countries) become further involved in the conflict (e.g., with aerial attacks on Islamist strongholds), eastern Libya may turn into yet another theater of conflict that attracts the volunteers of international jihadism and provides for their radicalization and conversion into hardened fighters that will come to plague the region and Western countries in the near future. In other words, there is a serious concern that Libya is developing into fertile ground for a repetition of the Islamic State scenario in Iraq and Syria.

Hence, Germany and its European partners should play an active role in UN-sponsored talks and refrain from supporting actors who push for a military solution. Rather, they should push for a unity government to emerge from the dialogues and assist it in stabilizing its rule and asserting its power over political decision making. In addition, they should play an active role in talks with regional actors (Qatar, Turkey, UAE, Egypt) and aim at convincing them not to impede reconciliation and compromise in Libya.

© Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2015  
All rights reserved

These Comments reflect solely the author's views.

**SWP**  
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4  
10719 Berlin  
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-100  
www.swp-berlin.org  
swp@swp-berlin.org

ISSN 1861-1761