

LIBYA | FROM CIVIL WAR TO JIHADIST RISK



The civil war has led to a fragile transition and elections which raised high expectations among the international community. The restoring of dialogue between armed groups from the revolution and former Gaddafi groups constitutes, in this regard, a priority. Especially as outgrowths of international jihadism in the country raise concerns about a similar trend to that seen in Syria.

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Nearly four years after the NATO intervention in Libya, the country is still far from being stabilised. Transition is only a vague hope, with a civil war between groups claiming to have Islamist allegiances to a General backed by foreign powers, starting with Egypt. Although Libya is at the centre of international concerns, because of the threat that the situation poses to the surrounding areas and also to European security, it is however necessary to distinguish what falls under internal factors inherent to tribal or identity tensions, and more generally what corresponds to post-revolutionary turmoil, closely linked to the jihadist issue that extends beyond the borders and for which the answer could not be the same.

| A major concern

During his visit to Chad on 22 November, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls recalled that southern Libya is a "major concern" for the French authorities, while calling for the "unabated" fight against jihadist groups in the Sahel. Almost two years after the launch of the Serval operation in January 2013, Libya has indeed become a drop zone for jihadists formerly based in Mali, but also an access point for arms and ammunition.

In order to deal with this threat and the demand from Sahelian partners concerned about the impact of foreign intervention in Libya and Mali, on 1 August 2014 France reorganised its military presence in the Sahel. Operations Serval and Epervier (Chad, 1986) have been officially ended, with troops being integrated into a new operation focussing on the sub-region. Referred to as Barkhane and relying on terrorist defence and combat agreements, it deploys more than 3,000 men throughout five countries (Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso¹), whose main mission is to assist partner states against jihadist groups through two types of actions: support to the local armed forces in their border control activities and destruction of jihadists attempting to penetrate their territory; strikes against logistics convoys and leaders moving from one space to another, in order to limit the scope of jihadist actions in the sub-region and interactions between the groups.

The Barkhane command post is located in N'Djamena, with nearly 1,300 men. A second important point of support is situated in Gao, also with more than a thousand men, and in addition intervening detachments for the benefit of local forces - as well as the Minusma for Mali -, trainers in Atar (Mauritania), UAVs in Niamey, and several secondary support points including Tessalit in northeast Mali, Faya-Largeau and Abeche respectively in northern and eastern Chad, or Madama in northern Niger. As for the Special Forces, they are located in Ouagadougou although, since the beginning of the Serval operation, most of the units are deployed in other countries².

Since its launch, the Barkhane operation has made it possible to intercept several convoys leaving Libya for Mali. In late September, the Al-Mourabitoun spokesman, Abu Aasim al-Muhajir, was captured in northern Niger by French Special Forces, while travelling in a convoy from southern Libya³. A few days later, French soldiers intercepted three tons of weapons in the same area - including a surface-to-air missile system - passing through to Mali. But while the French authorities' main fear is to witness an operational connection between Boko Haram and jihadist groups from the Sahara-Sahel region⁴, the situation remains precarious.

¹ These five countries share the common interest of belonging to the G5, a structure created in February 2014 and designed to provide a framework for coordination and monitoring of regional cooperation, particularly in terms of development.

² Added to this operation, and outside the five countries, are: two forward operating bases, one in Abidjan and the other one in Djibouti, and two operational cooperation divisions in Dakar and Libreville.

³ "Info RFI : un cadre du groupe de Mokhtar Belmokhtar arrêté au Niger", *RFI*, 27 September 2014.

⁴ A member of Ansaru is believed to have taken part into the attacks committed on 23 May 2013 by MUJAO in Agadez and Arlit, and the armed jihadist groups active in Mali supposedly have a large number of Nigerian fighters (Yves Fromion and Gwendal Rouillard, *Rapport d'information sur l'évolution du dispositif militaire français en Afrique et sur le suivi des opérations en cours*, Information Report, National Assembly (France), 9 July 2014, p. 126). Despite such relations, the prospect of an operational coordination is a source of

Northern Mali is a powder keg, jihadists having returned several times in the Amettetaï Valley since early 2013. Boko Haram continues its actions against a criticised Nigerian army and overflows into northern Cameroon. Finally, the Libyan transition was swept away by a civil war.

| A country in civil war

On 11 March, Libyan Prime Minister Ali Zeidan, on probation for several weeks, was removed from office and banned from travelling, by decision of Parliament. Discredited in the eyes of many Libyans since his brief kidnapping in October 2013 by a militia, he was in fact increasingly less capable of asserting his authority, particularly against the federalist rebels of Cyrenaica and even announcing in November 2013, the creation of an autonomous government. In this context, and as the General National Congress was weakened by the decision of members to self-extend from February to December 2014, the election of a new parliament in June crystallised the hopes of seeing the revival of a broken transition.

Far from ending the tensions, the House of Representatives, however, soon found itself caught in a spiral of violence. In Tripoli, on 5 July, amid heightened tensions and mutual recriminations between armed groups, marked in particular by an onslaught of the Zintan brigades - a city south-west of the capital - against the Parliament in May, an incident at a checkpoint is at the origin of the exchange of gunfire, which degenerated into intermittent clashes before reaching other districts. Three brigades from Misrata – at the east of Tripoli - became involved, supported by other brigades present in the city, with the mission of expelling the fighters of the Zintan tribe, particularly for control of the airport. Despite calls for a cease-fire and dialog, fighting is spilling over into other areas and on 13 and 14 July the Misrata brigades and their allies launched a new attack against the Zintan fighters. Five weeks later, on 23 August, the military coalition - called the Libyan Dawn - said it had achieved its primary objective to drive the Zintan brigades out of the capital⁵. In the process, rejecting the House of Representatives, it summoned the General National Congress to reconvene.

In the rest of the country, the situation is not much better. The Benghazi region has been plagued by heavy fighting since the launch of the "Dignity" offensive by the General Khalifa Haftar supporters, intended to "purge" the cradle of the "terrorist" revolution⁶. A second offensive launched on 15 October, reportedly killed at least 340 people in a month of fighting, according to a tally probably below actual figures. In the west, the Libyan Dawn launched an offensive at the same time. As for the southern regions, the persistence of tribal and ethnic tensions resulted in a series of sporadic clashes. On 12 June, tensions in the city of Jerma between the Tuareg and Arab communities thus led to violence, triggered by the Tuareg complaints about access to fuel. More recently, in early November, Toubou and Tuareg groups fought on the outskirts of the Al-Sharara oil field.

| International ramifications

The civil war engulfing Libya is inseparable from the country's internal dynamics. The fall of the "Guide", in power since 1969, created the conditions for an exacerbation of the identity and territorial claims. It ended a political and social regulation system centred on the person of Muammar Gaddafi, operating especially through oil revenues and a tribalised security apparatus. But the collapse of this chain regulating power and

debate (Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, *Nigeria's Interminable Insurgency? Addressing the Boko Haram Crisis*, Research Paper, Chatham House, September 2014, pp. 19-22).

⁵ *Secretary-General Report on the United Nations Support Mission in Libya*, S/2014/653, 5 September 2014, pp. 3-4.

⁶ Maryline Dumas, "Libye : l'ex-général Haftar à l'assaut des islamistes", *Le Figaro*, 19 May 2014.

redistributing wealth in a country with a fragile unity and operating according to an "allegiance-compensation" type of relationship⁷, generated conflicts over territories, their resources or the recognition of individual identities.

However, there are also international dynamics. Salafism, ancient in eastern Libya with political claims dating back to the formation of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) in 1995 was mainly composed of fighters returning from Afghanistan. But if the subject of these were essentially national and anti-Gaddafi⁸, they found themselves overwhelmed by a new generation of militants who fought in Iraq after 2003. At the vanguard of the Libyan revolution, at the head of anti-Gaddafi brigades in Benghazi or Derna, these activists reject democracy, calling for jihad, and develop internationalist rhetoric. Moreover, the group that controls the city of Derna, officially pledged allegiance to the Organization of the Islamic State in October and, on 13 November, this reunification was accepted by the Iraqi Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Similarly, the conflict in Libya became regionalised. With the help of the Egyptians, United Arab Emirates warplanes bombed southern Tripoli in August, to support brigades opposed to the Libyan Dawn⁹. The Egyptian and Algerian armed forces are believed to be more active in Libyan territory in tracking down jihadist elements, despite denials by the authorities. An *El-Watan* article, published in June 2014, thus stated that US, French and Algerian Special Forces¹⁰, coordinated their actions in Libya to reduce the jihadist threat in the country, suggesting a hunt for Al Qaeda leaders in the Islamic Maghreb and securing several localities¹¹, while other journalists evoked instead a forward defence of the border areas and the use of a right of action¹². As for the Egyptian leader Abdel-Fattah al-Sissi, at the end of November he acknowledged to *France 24* indirect support to General Haftar.

| Risk of a runaway reaction

The support to local fighters, raids on Libyan territory or targeted strikes make it possible to exert pressure on jihadist internationalist groups and restrict the establishment of safe havens. The challenge is all the more important considering that training camps have been set up by the Organization of the Islamic State in eastern Libya, as revealed on 3 December by US General David Rodriguez, head of US AFRICOM. For now, only 200 fighters from local militias are supposedly present, but the possibility of internationalisation is being carefully monitored.

Although necessary against groups led by an ideology that eschews all dialogue, such actions however do not allow underlying problems to be addressed. These issues are indeed shaking a fragmented and militarised country, both physically and mentally. On the contrary, although the old adage "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" has virtues against an opponent refusing any discussion and perceiving himself as engaged in a total war, it is not without limits when the friend reinforces divisions. While the installation of durable and accepted institutions requires the end of the current dynamic of conflict, General Haftar has broken the delicate balance between the country's main forces and increased internal fissures. On the one hand, he is far from reaching a consensus, being accused of having plunged the country "into chaos" with a coup against the National General Council in May, not being democratic, having a Gaddafi-related past, and

⁷ About the Gaddafi government's functioning and its levers, see Patrick Haimzadeh, *Au cœur de la Libye de Kadhafi*, Paris, JC Lattès, 2011, pp. 71-120.

⁸ About the LIFG, its origins and its struggle, see: Isabelle Mandreau, *Du djihad aux urnes : le parcours singulier d'Abdelhakim Belhadj*, Paris, Stock, 2013.

⁹ Thierry Oberlé, "Le conflit en Libye se régionalise", *Le Figaro*, 26 August 2014.

¹⁰ According to the *Washington Post*, special US forces arrested near Benghazi, Ahmed Abu Khattala, one of the leaders of the 11 September 2012 attack against local US consulate and considered by the US as the leader of the regional branch of the Ansar al-Sharia group ("Arrestation de Abu Khattala, l'un des suspects de l'attaque du consulat américain de Benghazi" *Jeune Afrique* 17 June 2014).

¹¹ Akram Kharief "L'armée algérienne intervient dans l'Ouest libyen", *El Watan*, 6 June 2014.

¹² Amine Kadi, "En Libye, Alger devient, en secret, un gendarme", *La Croix*, 25 June 2014.

being close to the CIA¹³. Furthermore, in a country where Islam is central and where some Islamists accept the rules of democracy, his intransigence has created a bipolarisation that could grow in the arms of the most radical disappointed supporters of politically-motivated Islam, even simply seeing in the internationalist jihadists some support against a common enemy.

There remains, *in fine*, that developments in Libya should not lead to forget that the jihadist problem is an issue that extends beyond borders¹⁴. In other words, if the old *Jamahiriyah* (People's Republic) is an area of retreat and implementation, if the operations in southern and eastern Libya make it possible to loosen the noose hanging over neighbouring states and to stop a dynamic of territorialisation, they will not end with a threat that will hasten to find other places to conduct their actions to implement a political-religious program and pursue a battle that ignores borders.



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With the Support



¹³ Wladimir Garcin, interview with Patrick Haimzadeh "Pourquoi la France ne doit pas intervenir en Libye" *Figaro Vox*, 12 September 2014. After participating in the 1969 military coup alongside Gaddafi, Haftar was appointed Chief of Staff during the war between Libya and Chad (1978-1987). Captured by Chadian forces in 1987, he was publicly disavowed and was jailed for three years in Chad, before being released by the United States welcoming him until the revolution (Armin Arefi "Khalifa Haftar, un général made in USA à l'assaut de la Libye", *LePoint.fr*, 19 May 2014).

¹⁴ More than 5,000 Tunisians supposedly went to Syria. Concerning Morocco, more than 1500 people supposedly left the kingdom (Laurent de Saint Périer, "Jihadistes de tous les pays ...", *Jeune Afrique*, 16 September 2014).