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# Libya – the next military operation with German participation?

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**At present, there are increasing indications that the international community will take more decisive action against the “Islamic State” and other terrorist groups in Libya. France, the United Kingdom and the United States announced that they were preparing for military operations in the fight against terrorism in the North African country. Contrary to recent news reports, Germany is currently giving rather cautious consideration to taking part in the stabilisation of Libya by, among other things, training the security forces of a future Libyan government. However urgently external support for Libya’s security is needed, it faces considerable obstacles and involves significant risks. In fact, at the moment it is more important to support the fragile political process in the country.**

Five years after the downfall of Libya’s ruler, Muammar al Gaddafi, the country is still on the brink of disaster. In the years after 2011, the collapse of state structures, fights between armed groups, and the continuing destabilisation of the country were caused in particular by political fragmentation, a lack of state monopoly on the use of force, and the fight for resources.

The situation deteriorated drastically in early 2015: Amidst the power vacuum caused by two competing governments, each supported by dozens of armed groups, the Libyan branch of “Da’esh” or the “Islamic State”<sup>1</sup> brought the coastal strip between the cities of Sirte and Nofaliya, extending inland for approximately 200 kilometres, under its control. As a result, terrorist activities in the country increased both in number and violence. IS extremists carried out several attacks in Libya’s capital Tripoli, occupied oil fields and attracted media attention by beheading 21 Egyptian Christians. At the moment, IS is making an effort to consolidate and extend its area of influence in Libya, both towards the east and in particular towards the oil fields in the southern parts of the country, which are currently one of the few sources of revenue for formerly rich Libya. At the same time, the terrorist group further escalates the chaotic situation in Libya. The most recent attack on a Libyan Coast Guard training camp in Zliten on 7 January 2016, in which more than 70 cadets were killed and more than 100 others were wounded, marks the tragic culmination of these activities.

Experts estimate that the Libyan branch of IS is currently still small in numbers. At this time, approximately 4,000 fighters are said to operate for IS in Libya, few compared to other militias frequently comprising several tens of thousands of men. But the group is gaining members. If the number of fighters returning from the Syrian-Iraqi conflict area remains constant, the number of fighters in the group is soon expected to rise to 5,000. At the same time, like in Iraq and Syria, there is a risk of IS benefitting from disagreements between other groups or even using targeted measures to weaken them. Coordinated action against terrorism

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<sup>1</sup> The Arabic term “Da’esh”, meant to label the terrorist militia as a group and not a state, is increasingly used in an official context (as well as in France and the UK) to describe the so-called Islamic State, IS, ISIL or ISIS. For reasons of readability and comprehensibility, the wider known term of IS will be used in this article.

is also made more difficult by the lack of powerful national military forces and the often conflicting particular interests of the estimated 1,000 armed groups in Libya.

There is, however, cautious hope for change. An agreement between the different Libyan conflict parties was signed on 17 December 2015 after tough negotiations under the guidance of the German Martin Kobler, UN Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL). The central element of this agreement is the institution of a government of national unity within 40 days after the date of signature. Working together with a nine-member presidential council, the unity government is to draw up a new constitution and initiate parliamentary elections within a transitional period of two years. After months of Libya being effectively paralysed, these are basic prerequisites for starting a process of political change, national reconciliation, and stabilisation of the country. This process is to end with the restitution of government authority and public order. However, the agreement is controversial. Only about half of the members of each of the two competing governments have signed the agreement. Some influential militias even consider it a threat to their interests and refuse their support.

Yet on 19 January 2016 and thus in due time, the presidential council submitted a list of 32 ministers for the future unity government. There is increasing uncertainty about whether the cabinet will ever be able to take up work in this form. This is due to the fact that the parliament in Tobruk in eastern Libya, which has been internationally recognised until now and whose approval is required on the basis of the agreement, rejected the proposal for the new government on 25 January 2016. This was a severe setback for the political process in Libya. It gives rise to the risk of another dangerous stalemate.

There have already been reactions at the international level to the domestic developments in Libya. Only a few days after the signature of the political agreement, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted a new Libya resolution. With this resolution, the member states are requested to undertake every effort to support UNSMIL in building the capacities of the future government of national unity. At the same time, the resolution calls on the member states to answer promptly and with priority requests by the unity government asking for support in implementing the political process and handling the critical humanitarian, economical and security-political situation in Libya. This expressly includes active support in the fight against groups affiliated with IS and Al Qaeda and for implementing the provisional security agreement between the armed groups.

### **Current considerations on military support for Libya**

There are currently two different approaches regarding active support of Libya's security. On the one hand, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States are apparently prepared to take action against IS in Libya in a relatively timely manner. France in particular insists on fast and decisive action in order to prevent the Islamist extremists from growing stronger and spreading out across the country. Preparations for military operations have already started. Just like the US forces, the French Air Force flew several reconnaissance missions over Libyan territory in early December 2015. France is now promoting the forging of a coalition with its European partners, but also with Arab League and African Union states for the fight against the IS branch in Libya. The French government has apparently already found support for this from the UK and Italy. Great Britain expressed its willingness to send up to 1,000 soldiers into the fight against terrorism. In contrast to its stance regarding Syria, Italy, too, approved of direct intervention against the IS in Libya.

On the other hand, during a meeting in Rome in mid-December 2015, the foreign minister of 17 countries agreed that, given the multitude of militias in Libya and the changing coalitions between them, loyal security forces are urgently needed in order to provide support for the new unity government and to stabilise the country. During the debate on ways in which the necessary training of military and police forces could initially be ensured outside of Libya, for instance in Tunisia or Morocco, many participants demonstrated their

readiness to contribute to this project. In the beginning of 2016, UN Special Representative Kobler pronounced himself in favour of a German commitment in such a training mission. Germany is now examining how and under what conditions it could potentially participate in the mission.

It appears ever more probable that a German commitment in Libya, even a military deployment, is being considered very closely. On the basis of fears that several jihadist groups in the Maghreb and the Sahel could merge and thus form an “axis of terror” in Africa, Federal Minister of Defence, Ursula von der Leyen, emphasised that Germany would be unable to shy away from its responsibility to contribute to the stabilisation of Libya. The minister did not, however, share any details about a potential commitment.

## **Background of current efforts**

But why do the international community and in particular the European states increase their efforts to stabilise Libya now of all times? There are several interlinked factors explaining this fact. First of all, there is hope that the establishment of a government of national unity will create *one* legitimate point of contact in Libya in the future. This point of contact would be formally entitled to make requests for support that are legitimate under international law. The international community wants to be prepared for that.

Secondly, however, all those involved seem to understand that merely signing the political agreement will not lead to peace in Libya; it is just considered a first step in this direction. However, the initiated political process is fragile. There are fears that, without political, economic, humanitarian, and also military support from outside the country, the destabilisation and erosion of order in Libya may become increasingly widespread and that IS and other terrorist groups may come out as winners in the end. This threat could spread throughout the entire Maghreb and Sahel region.

Thirdly, such fears are fuelled by the experience gained in Syria and Iraq. There, the threat posed by IS was underestimated in the beginning. As a result, the terrorist militia managed to bring large parts of both countries under its control and established a brutal regime with quasi-governmental structures by exploiting the chaos in the region. An outside attempt to prevent the extremists from spreading out and consolidating their power was made only at a late stage. Although sustained efforts such as air strikes against IS positions, drying up their financial sources and training, and supporting local forces weaken the group, they clearly demonstrate how difficult it is to fight the terrorist militia. The international community evidently wants to prevent this from happening in Libya at all costs. France and the UK in particular are convinced that we can, if not indeed must, successfully take action against the IS branch in Libya as long as it is still small in numbers, relatively weak, and only active in certain areas of the country. The current attempts of the militia to destroy Libyan oil fields have likely further encouraged the efforts of the western world. The same applies to the terrorist acts in Paris, Istanbul, and Jakarta. The tragic events in recent months united and strengthened the international community in its action against the terrorist militia.

Fourthly and finally, Libya’s geopolitical situation and its immediate vicinity to Europe are crucial factors. Only about 300 or 400 kilometres separate the Libyan coast from European islands such as Lampedusa, Malta or Crete. Over the past years, this has made Libya a central hub and main transit route of refugee movements from Africa across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. In 2015 alone, around 140,000 people mainly from the Sahel states, Eritrea, and Somalia are thought to have come to Europe via Libya, according to estimates of the International Organization for Migration. Observers now fear that the failure of political process would dramatically escalate violence and the catastrophic situation in the country and thus trigger a new wave of refugees, in particular Libyan emigrants. This new wave could exacerbate the already tense situation in Europe with regard to dealing with massive migration flows, social cohesion, and European solidarity. This means that Europe, above all the southern states but also Germany, has a major interest in stabilising Libya in order to fight against the causes of migration.

## **Obstacles and risks of current considerations regarding external military support**

Despite comprehensible reasons and the definite need for external and even military support for Libya, the two options currently under discussion face significant obstacles and also some risks. There is a general risk that the international efforts will lose their basis from the outset if the political agreement concluded in December 2015 cannot be implemented or if the fragile political process fails completely. The rejection of the proposed cabinet by the parliament in Tobruk makes it increasingly unlikely that the government of national unity will be confirmed in office in the foreseeable future, let alone within the agreed period of 40 days. This would mean, however, that there is no legitimate point of contact regarding external support for either the fight against terrorism or the training of Libyan security forces. In addition, the longer the establishment of the new unity government is delayed, the more weakened is its claim to legitimacy and authority in the country and the greater is the risk of old lines of conflict reopening and dissenters splitting off.

Even if the new government takes up its work, it will, according to current conditions, have only limited support and influence in the country – a fact that must also be taken into consideration for both options. In view of Libya's still deep-seated reservations about outside interference, especially from western nations, even the deployment of forces following a legitimate request for support might lead to considerable tensions in the country. These tensions could have the potential to undermine the position of the government and thus endanger the political process as a whole. Consequently, all plans will need to pay special attention to this fact, and diplomatic means should be employed at an early stage to counteract the development of such a situation. In addition, it is imperative that regional actors be involved in all external efforts.

Does the situation in Libya require swift military intervention, as called for by France or the UK? Certainly not. An international military commitment without the approval of a legitimate Libyan point of contact would most likely compromise the objective of supporting the implementation of the political process. Such an approach could not only destabilise Libya even further, but also unite previously competing armed groups in the fight against foreign forces. It is also possible that the planned military counterterrorism operations may play into the hands of IS and other jihadists. Similar to what happened in Iraq and Syria, the allegation that the West is on a crusade against Islam, against which the Muslim world has to defend itself in a holy war, could fall on sympathetic ears within and outside of Libya. An influx of foreign fighters or armed splinter groups joining IS are likely results.

However, there are also obstacles to the idea of training for the security forces of the new unity government, and some basic prerequisites for it are still missing. Given an estimated 1,000 different armed groups in Libya, it is likely very difficult to include them all in the transformation process and identify those that were not involved in the bloody conflicts of the civil war and are regarded as neutral by a majority of the conflict parties. This also applies to issue of the loyalty of these troops to new unity government. There is a risk that troops in training will use the external support to pursue their own objectives and power interests instead of contributing to the stabilisation of Libya. Even if the security committee formed from Libyan military representatives is to coordinate security issues and select troops in the future, the nations involved in a training mission will (have to) take a very critical look at them. Frictions are therefore inevitable.

Finally, there are still problems regarding the framework conditions for such a training project. On the one hand, there are still numerous unanswered questions: What tasks exactly will the Libyan soldiers be trained for? Which training contents will result from this? How long will the training last? And will aspects of equipment assistance have to be considered? On the other hand, important points of contact to coordinate the planned training activities are missing not only in Libya, but also in Tunisia or Morocco.

## Conclusions

In view of the complex and volatile situation in Libya and the large number of identifiable obstacles and risks of military support operations, the international community must act with caution in their efforts to stabilise the country in order not to eventually counteract their own intentions. From today's perspective, there are tight limits and few options in particular for the initiatives pushed for by France and the UK to fight against terrorism in Libya. Insufficient risk assessment, premature action or heavy intervention from the outside could ruin the cautious prospects for positive changes. It would also be very one-dimensional to only look at Libya from the viewpoint of experiences made in Syria.

In contrast, the idea of a training mission for Libyan security forces, which has so far been generally supported by Germany, appears constructive because Libyan forces can be involved in the solution of the conflict and long-term institutional capacity can be built. Since many prerequisites for such an operation are still missing, however, it is doubtful that detailed plans for Bundeswehr involvement already exist at this time, contrary to press reports to that effect.

From a security-political perspective, the Libyan political process is currently the priority. This means that we will have to be patient and wait for developments regarding the implementation of the political agreement in Libya. It also means that, at the same time, diplomatic, economic, development, and humanitarian efforts must be made to support the fragile process. Germany could take on leadership responsibility for such a comprehensive approach to the stabilisation of Libya. The primary objective would be to strengthen the legitimacy and capacity of the future government of national unity as a political actor and to expand the conflict parties' support of the agreement. Military means could be employed as soon as improvements in this regard can be identified, reservations about outside support have been reduced, and fundamental framework conditions have been sorted out.

Until that time at the latest, however, all actors should have agreed on the long-term objectives, strategies, and measures they want to pursue with regard to Libya. It is clear that a sustainable but restrictive involvement is required to shape public order in the country. This is what the developments since 2011 have taught us.

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