

## **Three Steps to Pull Libya Out of its Crisis**

**By: Karim Mezran - Atlantic Council - July 24, 2014**

If recent days' events are any indication, Libya is rapidly descending into chaos. The latest clashes began with the attack on the main international airport in Tripoli, with rival militias pitted against one another in an armed struggle, fomenting anarchy and bringing the country to the brink of civil war. In the meantime, a clear humanitarian crisis is developing as civilian populations in Tripoli and Benghazi suffer from fuel shortages, interrupted water and electric supply, gang raids, kidnappings, and a general deterioration in the rule of law. The insecurity drives population movement as families flee their homes and evacuate from entire neighborhoods—in essence, becoming internally displaced persons. In light of the unfolding humanitarian crisis, the United Nations Security Council must pass a new resolution, similar to the one issued in 2011 based on civilian protection, to allow foreign action to separate the contenders and pave the way for an international peacekeeping force.

The escalating violence, while undesired, was entirely foreseeable. The perception, held by Islamist groups and their allies in Misrata and other Libyan cities, of their progressive marginalization from the political spectrum and, therefore, from power comprised the driving force behind the recent clashes. Leaders of the Islamist and non-Islamist factions attempted to negotiate a resolution to the prolonged political crisis, but to no avail. Reciprocal accusations of intolerance and unwillingness to compromise dominated the negotiations. Meanwhile, Islamists have witnessed a palpable shift in their representation on elected committees—namely the Constitutional Committee and the recently elected House of Representatives, both of which produced results unfavorable to the Islamist bloc. The loss of influence and representation has sparked fear among Islamists of losing complete control of the political process within state institutions, prompting a violent reaction.

The attack on the airport, in an effort to dislodge the Zintani militias (the armed branch of the non-Islamist factions), carries two objectives. First, it aims to bring traffic into and out of the country under Islamist control. By disrupting operations at the Tripoli airport, Islamist militias ensure that air traffic (and influence) is diverted to the Misrata and Maitega airports, both functioning under Islamist forces. Second, and more importantly, Islamists hope to create a state of insecurity and emergency that would prevent the House of Representatives from convening, robbing their adversaries of their political and representational advantage.

Recognizing the inability of the nascent national security apparatus to respond to the escalating violence, interim Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thinni last week suggested the government would seek some kind of international intervention, implying the possibility of one military in nature. Overwhelmed by rapid developments and a lack of information, the policy world feels it has limited room to maneuver. Three courses of action, however, could potentially turn the course of events around. They will require significant political will and capital: One possible avenue to resolve the crisis would involve the international community forcing, under threat of military intervention, all warring factions to leave the major urban cities and surrender their heavy weaponry. This could consist of targeted air force attacks against those brigades and militias that do not comply with the ultimatum. Following the withdrawal of the contenders, a peacekeeping force could be sent to guarantee safety for civilians and to protect the country's vital installations, including water supply facilities, oil fields, and government buildings.

As physical security is restored, a tripartite coalition would launch a political dialogue. The United Nations would organize and convene negotiations, with members of the international

community pressuring the warring militias and all relevant political and tribal actors to the table. The National Dialogue Preparatory Commission (NDPC) would represent Libya as the third co-chair of this endeavor, with the aim to debate and establish a roadmap that properly addresses political grievances with a commitment to nonviolence. In an effort to remove the militia representatives from a highly pressurized environment, the United Nations might consider seeking help from neighboring Malta, Morocco, or other neutral countries to host these negotiations.

In parallel with these procedures, the NDPC would resume its work on a comprehensive national dialogue, engaging the population at large to discuss fundamental issues of national identity and reconciliation, transition justice, system of government, and more.

The latest crisis has revealed more than ever that Libya's elite lack the capacity to assert authority in the face of fragmentation or to lead the country toward a peaceful resolution. It also underscored the ineffectiveness of the international community's light footprint in Libya following the former dictator's ouster. Indeed, embassies have issued statements condemning the violence and expressing concern, but such declarations have not stopped the violence. The Libyan government's latest outreach to the International Criminal Court to prosecute the warring militias signals an eagerness for foreign assistance. The sooner the international community can leverage the opening to do more to assist Libya, the better. It remains in the interest of Europe, the United States, and Libya's neighbors to ensure that the country does not become another Somalia—this time in the middle of the Mediterranean.

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