



Building a New Foundation for Stability in Libya

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Introduction and summary

For almost five years, Libyans have struggled to build a new political order for their country out of the wreckage left by Moammar Gadhafi's four-decade dictatorship. Despite successful national elections in July 2012, political factions backed by various militias have sought power at the expense of their rivals. As a result, Libya's oil production and, consequently, its economy have collapsed along with any semblance of a post-Gadhafi political order.¹

This violent struggle for power has created a security vacuum, filled in part by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS, and various Al Qaeda-linked terrorist groups, such as Ansar al-Sharia. In the past year, Libya has become a strategic location for ISIS. Due to coalition military pressure, the group has told recruits to head for Sirte in Libya rather than stay in Syria or Iraq.² The growing presence of ISIS in Libya—now estimated to total as many as 6,500 fighters³—represents a direct security threat to the United States and its allies in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa.

As this threat grows more acute, the United States and its allies have been forced to re-evaluate their Libya policies—a process that is still underway. Since the 2014 breakdown of the post-Gadhafi political order, the United Nations has led the international community in attempts to bring Libya's warring political factions together under a national unity government. The hope is that the offer of help from the United States and other countries to rebuild Libya's governing institutions would provide an impetus for Libyans to come together in a new, unified government, strengthening Libya's sovereignty and unity as a result. This is, however, a long-term approach that does not address the immediate challenges posed by ISIS and other terrorist groups.

Libya today epitomizes the complicated situation the United States faces in developing and implementing a cohesive strategy across the Middle East and North Africa, or MENA, region. The United States seeks to help countries produce stable governments with political legitimacy and functioning institutions in the long

term. But short-term security threats from terrorist groups and other non-state actors that require immediate responses make achieving the long-term strategy more daunting. For example, actions taken to fight ISIS in Libya could undermine diplomatic efforts to forge a national unity government or build adequate governing institutions. Similarly, delaying action against ISIS until a Libyan national unity government is formed gives the group more time to increase its reach in Libya, the region, and beyond.

Another issue centers on how to define U.S. leadership and engagement with other countries that have a stake and responsibility in Libya. The United States has tried to work cooperatively with nations in the region and Europe in order to support Libya. At times, these governments have been slow to respond to the challenges Libya presents and, in some cases, have taken steps that are counterproductive to addressing the short-term security threats and long-term goal of producing a functioning government. The urgency of the moment in Libya provides the U.S. with an opportunity to show resolve and leadership in building a proactive strategy aimed at both producing a new foundation for long-term stability and addressing immediate threats. Taking action now could help avoid the kind of crisis the international community currently faces in Syria.

This report offers several recommendations in the areas of security, diplomacy, and the economy that the United States and its allies should undertake in Libya.

Security

- Create an international Libya support group, or ILSG, that would—among other things—coordinate all security related efforts, including airstrikes against ISIS and other terrorist groups; intelligence sharing; and possible deployment of troops in accordance with international law
- Prepare to help Libya rebuild its security institutions
- Provide assistance to vetted Libyan militias in order to retake territory from ISIS until unified national-level security institutions can be established
- Increase support for security forces protecting oil facilities
- Provide border control assistance to Libya's neighbors, especially Tunisia

Diplomacy

- Offer support and assistance through the G7 and G20 in order to incentivize Libya's political factions to agree to a national unity government
- Support civil society to help Libya establish a functioning, unified government

Economy

- Secure and invest in Libya's energy sector to make it more competitive
- Support job creation, especially for youth and demobilized militia members
- Develop the private sector, including through working with existing Libyan economic institutions

The challenges in Libya require a long-term approach, as well as a coordinated international support and structure. The country's many problems will not be solved overnight. The next U.S. administration will still be dealing with these issues. The most immediate concern for Libya, its neighbors, the United States, and the European Union is the increasing terrorist threat in the country, particularly ISIS.

If the Libyan people can come together, support from the United States and the international community should be substantial and sustained until the economy can be revived and a degree of stability is established. If Libyans continue their infighting, legitimate actors and the factions that renounce extremism will require support to counter the ability of terrorists to exploit the power vacuum. Either way, the U.S. commitment to Libya will need to increase and continue in order to protect U.S. interests and security.

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