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## Libya and the New Axis of Terror: Reshaping the Security Theater in MENA and Europe

The exponential expansion of Islamist groups in both numbers and geographic scope to Libya and Syria between 2011 and 2017, and the

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subsequent refugee crisis it sparked, has led to a rapidly deteriorating human security theatre in the Middle East, North Africa, and the European Union. To illustrate the renaissance of violent Islamist movements in radicalizing and recruiting youth, during September 2011 al-Qaeda's army consisted of around 400 fighters. By 2017, the Islamic State's (ISIS) army alone had approximately 40,000 fighters,<sup>1</sup> of whom roughly 6,000 came from Western Europe.<sup>2</sup> The Islamic State itself, which was defeated in Mosul only after an unprecedented collaboration by otherwise antagonistic powers, was an emblem of Islamist achievement as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi established quasi-state strongholds in the most strategic countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)—hitherto a jihadist pipe dream. As Peter Neumann pointed out in his *Radicalized: New Jihadists and Threat to the West*:

The “Islamic empire” that al Baghdadi proclaimed in a Friday sermon at the al-Nuri Mosque in the Iraqi city of Mosul surpassed every previous jihadist achievement. It stretched for more than 500 miles, sat at the heart of the Islamic world, was within striking distance of Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem, the holiest cities of Islam—and on top of all that—it wiped away the hated Sykes-Picot border, which millions of Arabs consider a symbol of colonial division and oppression. Al-Baghdadi had overshadowed his internal rival, al-Julani, his previous group, al-Qaeda, the great Osama bin Laden and even his role model Zarqawi, all in a single stroke.<sup>3</sup>

With its close proximity to both Libya and Syria, Europe's security theatre was also deeply degraded beyond the pre-existing threat from Islamist networks. Following the refugee crisis of 2015,<sup>4</sup> considered to be the worst since World War II, reciprocal radicalization between violent Islamist extremists and violent right-wing groups emerged as the most challenging dynamic against the prevention of youth radicalization in Europe.<sup>5</sup> Feeding off a series of ISIS-inspired or directed jihadi attacks and exploiting the refugee crisis, while campaigning on an anti-Muslim and anti-immigration rhetoric and painting all Muslims as a threat, right-wing extremism enjoyed its own renaissance in Europe, with far-right parties making huge political gains among voters from France to Austria, Denmark to the Netherlands, and to Greece, Italy, and Hungary.<sup>6</sup> Incidents of right-wing terrorism and hate crimes have also increased dramatically, with terrorists like Anders Breivik having staged their own brutal attacks,<sup>7</sup> while in Germany nearly ten attacks were made on migrants every day in 2016, injuring a total of 560 people, including 43 children.<sup>8</sup>

The jihadists had powerful support from state sponsors and safe havens. Today, the new alliance of old and new rogues perpetuating conflict in Libya, Syria, and Yemen consists of Qatar, Turkey, Iran, and Sudan, along with the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS, al-Qaeda, and a large spectrum of jihadist groups acting as their alternately violent and non-violent proxies, or “freelancers,”

to borrow Raymond Tanter's description of groups who have violence outsourced to them by states.<sup>9</sup>

Today, the new and re-shuffled axis of rogues also enjoys an immense advantage that was unavailable to old rogues such as Muammar Gaddafi: a powerful and partisan mass media apparatus that can successfully degrade U.S. threat perception and drive pro-Islamist policy. As Elizabeth Dickinson has described, "That's essentially what Qatar has long offered its friends: a platform, with access to money, media, and political capital. Washington has so far played along, but the question is whether the United States is actually getting played."<sup>10</sup> More importantly, the unprecedented success of new and old rogues in encouraging the large-scale deterioration of the security theatre in the MENA, and by extension Europe, was facilitated by an unlikely enabler: the administration of then U.S. President Barack H. Obama who viewed Islamists, both violent and non-violent, as partners for cooperation rather than combat. As Anne R. Pierce explains:

American foreign policy at its best emphasizes *both* national security and security partnerships, and human rights. But President Obama and Secretaries of State Clinton and Kerry emphasized *neither*. They generally treated democratic allies and pro-democracy groups ungenerously, while treating adversaries and anti-democratic groups generously. The misguided hope was to create a unified, if morally mute world in which we could all, somehow, get along. Our debility and lack of compassion in turn gave hostile forces momentum, and fuel for their propaganda. As the United States weakened traditional relationships and surrendered leadership, trust in our reliability waned, while questions about our priorities grew. Often, we alienated the very moderate and peaceful countries and peoples we need on our side.<sup>11</sup>

In response to the perceived American leadership void, and concerns regarding the Obama administration's seeming absence of commitment to combating violent and non-violent Islamism, a tectonic and historical shift took place in 2017 as an unprecedented indigenous anti-terror alliance emerged across North Africa and the Middle East to form a bulwark against the new Axis of Terror, both militarily and ideologically. Shocking observers, the new leadership of crown prince Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia—prodded by the new U.S. President, Donald J. Trump—radically abandoned that country's decades of radical pro-Islamist policy and embarked on a relentless reformation campaign.<sup>12</sup> Impeding the expansion of ISIS and other terror networks in North Africa, the Libyan National Army, under the auspices of the country's democratically elected House of Representatives which had been forcibly removed from Tripoli in 2014 by the Islamists, and with the support of Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), prevailed over the enemy against all odds and largely cleared Eastern

Libya of jihadists. Nevertheless, perpetuated by the New Axis of Terror and buttressed by counterproductive policy decisions by Western powers, the conflict in Libya continues, as the western region of Libya remains a hotbed of militias<sup>13</sup> involved in terrorism and organized crime, while ISIS is regrouping in the country's south,<sup>14</sup> now the heartland of human trafficking and the narco-jihadist pipeline.<sup>15</sup>

## THE NEW ROGUES

*We have been one of the main beneficiaries of the revolutions in the Arab world. ... As for our benefiting from the [Libyan] weapons, this is a natural thing in these kind of circumstances.*

— Narco-jihadist Mokhtar Belmokhtar of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

*A mistake repeated more than once is a decision.*

—proverb

With the exception of Turkey<sup>16</sup> and Iran,<sup>17</sup> few came to Qatar's defense when Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Bahrain abruptly severed ties with the gas-rich nation, citing its record of financing and arming Islamist extremist groups. The elected government of Libya (the House of Representatives based in Tobruk), Yemen, Mauritania, and Maldives followed suit while Jordan downgraded its relationship.<sup>18</sup> Much has been made of Qatar's ties to Iran, al-Qaeda, and its support of the Muslim Brotherhood, in addition to its status as a long-time haven for extremists.<sup>19</sup> But little is mentioned of recent Qatari policies that have the gravest consequences to both regional and European security: their support for extremist proxies in North Africa and Syria.

Qatar invested not only in the soft power of media outlets like al-Jazeera, prestigious think tanks like the Brookings Institution,<sup>20</sup> and London real estate,<sup>21</sup> or "buying Britain by the pound"<sup>22</sup> in general, but also in radical Islamist proxies. According to a report by the Counter Extremism Project, "the Qatari government has paid ransom demands, shipped supplies, and funneled billions of dollars of funding—to internationally-designated extremist groups throughout the Middle East and North Africa. These groups include al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Nusra Front, and the Taliban."<sup>23</sup> In addition, in May 2018, Qatar was revealed to have paid approximately \$700 million dollars to both Iranian leaders and their regional Shia militias, and paid \$200–\$300 million dollars to Islamist groups within Syria, mostly to the al-Qaeda affiliated group Tahrir al-Sham.<sup>24</sup> Qatar initially denied these accusations until the *Washington Post* revealed intercepted messages.<sup>25</sup> The

*New York Times* also published an in-depth and groundbreaking report detailing the context of the payout and Iran's role in the hostage deal.<sup>26</sup>

Qatar also stage-managed the 2011 Libyan regime change intervention.<sup>27</sup> To draw the North Atlantic Treaty Organization into a rushed and self-defeating intervention on the side of Qatar's Islamist proxies, al-Jazeera enforced a systematic media strategy of weaponizing fake news. Qatar propagated falsehoods of impending genocide,<sup>28</sup> as well as the Viagra-fueled mass rape hoax through its state-sponsored al-Jazeera network.<sup>29</sup> Qatar also flooded the country's jihadist rebels with at least 20,000 tons of weapons<sup>30</sup> and supported them with its own troops.<sup>31</sup> According to David Roberts:

Nor were fighters the only material the emirate sent the rebels. In April, Qatari transport aircraft regularly departed Doha with armaments for the rebels, including French-made Milan antitank missiles and Belgian-made FN assault rifles. Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani declared that Qatar was sending "defensive" weaponry to the rebels, but news accounts from Tripoli suggest the support went even further. Qatari special forces reportedly provided basic infantry training to Libyan rebel fighters in the Nafusa Mountains, to the west of Tripoli, and eastern Libya. The Qatari military even brought Libyan fighters back to Doha for special exercises. And in the final assault on Qaddafi's Bab al- Aziziya compound on August 24, Qatari special forces were seen on the front lines of the fight.<sup>32</sup>

In violation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, the report by the UN Panel of Experts on Libya released in June 2017 also revealed that during the uprising

[i]nsurgents on the western front depended on transfers from Benghazi over the sea route to Tunisia and onward to the Nafusa Mountains. ... The Panel has collected over eight accounts of a delivery by sea, paid for by Qatar, of about 40 tons of military equipment to Zarzis, allegedly escorted by the Tunisian armed forces to the Dhehiba-Wazin border post with Libya.<sup>33</sup>

## WHO WERE THE REBELS?

Unlikely purveyors of democracy, the rebels at the forefront of the fighting on the ground in Libya were Islamists and ex-mujahideen fighters, mostly from the eastern city of Derna, who had fought against the Americans in Afghanistan and Iraq, and would later hijack the political process from the secular Libyan majority following the ouster and assassination of Gaddafi. For example, in 2011, Abdel-Hakim al-Hasidi, a Libyan rebel leader, admitted that his fighters had links to al-Qaeda and fought against coalition

troops in Iraq. He described them as “patriots and good Muslims, not terrorists,” adding that “members of al-Qaeda are also good Muslims and are fighting against the invader.”<sup>34</sup> Four years prior to the intervention, the United States Army’s Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, New York, received nearly 700 reports on foreign nationals who entered Iraq between August 2006 and August 2007, known as the “Sinjar records.” Though al-Baghdadi at that time wished to portray al-Qaeda’s Islamic State of Iraq as purely Iraqi in composition, the Sinjar records surprisingly revealed that Saudis made up the largest contingent of foreign fighters entering Iraq, with Libyans coming second.<sup>35</sup> The Sinjar records also revealed that almost one in five foreign fighters arriving in Iraq came from eastern Libya, mainly from the city of Derna while the rest came from Sirte and Misrata in the west.<sup>36</sup> These same jihadi fighters would later take advantage of post-intervention chaos to establish the Islamic State’s strongholds in Libya. Until it was liberated by the Libyan National Army in July 2018, these fighters maintained their Derna stronghold through the Derna Shura Council of Mujahedeen (DSCM) who rebranded themselves as the Derna Protection Force before they were defeated.<sup>37</sup>

The al-Thani regime was not alone in expanding its sphere of influence abroad by sponsoring terrorist proxies in Libya and Syria. Turkey’s Erdogan regime, much like Iran, was and continues to be a strong ally. On 7 January 2018, Greek authorities impounded a cargo vessel from Turkey loaded with arms and explosives that was headed to the Libyan port city of Misrata, also a hotbed of Islamists.<sup>38</sup> The vessel, stocked with 29 full containers of explosives and detonators, was intercepted off the Cretan port of Iraklio. The cargo also included a large quantity of the explosive agent ammonium nitrate and 11 empty liquefied petroleum gas tanks. This was not the first time the Greek coast guard patrol had intercepted a Turkish vessel engaged in arms smuggling to Islamist militias. On 2 September 2015, Greek authorities raided a vessel loaded with weapons that was destined for Misrata and Tobruk, 20 nautical miles northeast of Crete. The vessel, the *Haddad I*, was carrying a cargo of almost 500,000 rounds of ammunition and 5,000 rifles.<sup>39</sup> Qatar and Turkey have also established a close cooperation to smuggle arms out of Libya and to their other terrorist proxies in Syria. According to the *New York Times*, as far back as 2013:

Evidence gathered in Syria, along with flight-control data and interviews with militia members, smugglers, rebels, analysts and officials in several countries, offers a profile of a complex and active multinational effort, financed largely by Qatar, to transport arms from Libya to Syria’s opposition fighters. Libya’s own former fighters, who sympathize with Syria’s rebels, have been eager collaborators.... Those weapons, which slipped from state custody as Colonel Qaddafi’s

people rose against him in 2011, are sent on ships or Qatar Emiri Air Force flights to a network of intelligence agencies and Syrian opposition leaders in Turkey. From there, Syrians distribute the arms according to their own formulas and preferences to particular fighting groups, which in turn issue them to their fighters on the ground, rebels and activists said.<sup>40</sup>

At the same time, as early as 2013, *Jane's Intelligence* had already established that nearly half of the Syrian rebels were jihadis affiliated with al-Qaeda, Jabhat al Nursra and ISIS.<sup>41</sup> As Charles Lister observed, “The insurgency is now dominated by groups which have at least an Islamist viewpoint on the conflict. The idea that it is mostly secular groups leading the opposition is just not borne out.”<sup>42</sup> In retrospect, the “Free Syrian Army” was nothing more than “a Qatari myth.”<sup>43</sup> Much like its *modus operandi* in Libya, the al-Jazeera media state tool played a pivotal role in deceiving Western powers into providing support to their terrorist proxies, falsely painting them as peaceful liberators rather than terrorists who once empowered, would not only target locals but also victims in Europe and the United States. According to a former al-Jazeera contributor Sharmine Narwani, its coverage of Syria involved “literally manufacturing information about events in the country, and burying data points that contradicted its narrative” and engaging in a “widespread corporate media exercise to ‘market’ the Syrian conflict to a global audience in order to frame [the rebels] as ‘liberators’ and justify foreign ‘humanitarian’ intervention.”<sup>44</sup> Regardless, on 18 September 2013 the U. S. Senate passed a bill supporting President Obama’s plan to fund, train, and arm the mysterious and ‘moderate’ Syrian rebels—ostensibly to battle the Islamic State.<sup>45</sup>

Furthering the threat to Europe’s southern flank, in October 2017, Qatar was accused of redirecting ISIS fighters fleeing from Syria and Iraq to the Libyan frontier. Christopher Davidson argued that following the defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, Qatar is now involved in facilitating the reverse flow of fighters: “Its usefulness has significantly declined in that theater of operations, and the weapons and presumably the men—at least the foreign fighters—are being moved to where they're needed most. And I believe that one of those locations at the moment is the Libyan conflict.”<sup>46</sup> The New Axis of Rogues are not only recycling jihadist fighters to fight in the Libyan theatre, but also against the Kurds and U.S forces in Afrin, Syria:

Turkey's military incursion against Kurdish groups in Afrin, Syria, has helped bring US-backed ground offensives targeting ISIS to a near halt, multiple US officials tell CNN, putting the military campaign against the terror group at risk, an effort seen as one of the Trump administration's principle successes.<sup>47</sup>



According to ex-ISIS fighter Faraj, who is still in close touch with the terrorist organization, Turkey is recruiting and retraining ISIS fighters to fight the U.S.-backed Kurds in Afrin:

Most of those who are fighting in Afrin against the YPG [People's Protection Units] are Isis, though Turkey has trained them to change their assault tactics. ... Turkey at the beginning of its operation tried to delude people by saying that it is fighting Isis, but actually they are training Isis members and sending them to Afrin.<sup>48</sup>

Aside from Libya and Syria, Qatar's network of proxy militaries also includes Taliban insurgents, Somali Islamists, and Sudanese rebels.<sup>49</sup> Sudan is the nexus for the new axis from which both arms and fighters are smuggled into North Africa and Syria. In September 2014, the Libyan government expelled the Sudanese military attaché, accusing Sudan of arming the Islamist Libya Dawn militias in Tripoli who are waging war against the elected parliament: "Sudan is interposing itself by providing arms to a terrorist group that is attacking the headquarters of the state. ... This also represents a clear violation of international resolutions, and the latest UN Security Council resolution."<sup>50</sup> The Libyan militias were not the only ones illegally receiving arms from Sudan. In what is a familiar *modus operandi*, *The New York Times* also reported that Sudan was funneling arms to Syrian jihadists:

Syrian rebels, frustrated by the West's reluctance to provide arms, have found a supplier in an unlikely source: Sudan, a country that has been under international arms embargoes and maintains close ties with a stalwart backer of the Syrian government, Iran. In deals that have not been publicly acknowledged, Western officials and Syrian rebels say, Sudan's government sold Sudanese- and Chinese-made arms to Qatar, which arranged delivery through Turkey to the rebels. The shipments included anti-aircraft missiles and newly manufactured small-arms cartridges, which were seen on the battlefield in Syria—all of which have helped the rebels combat the Syrian government's better-armed forces and loyalist militias.<sup>51</sup>

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, on 21 November 2014, Sudan and Qatar signed a military cooperation agreement.<sup>52</sup> In March 2018, Qatar also agreed to a \$4 billion dollar plan with the government of Sudan to develop the Red Sea port of Suakin.<sup>53</sup> This followed Turkey's announcement in December 2017 to develop a naval facility in Suakin.<sup>54</sup> The alliance of Iran, Qatar, Turkey, and Sudan has thereby created a strategic triangle for the sponsoring of terror that crosses from Africa, the Middle East, to Turkey in Europe's Eastern border. In a bait-and-switch, the Qatari-driven intervention in Syria created another vacuum and safe haven in the region for Iran, Hezbollah, and other terrorist organizations in which to expand,

prompting an Iranian member of parliament to point out that Tehran is going through a phase of “grand jihad,” and that “Three Arab capitals have today ended up in the hands of Iran and belong to the Islamic Iranian revolution” and that Sanaa (Yemen) will be the next.<sup>55</sup> In Europe, Iran, along with Qatar’s ally Turkey, has become more aggressive against Greece,<sup>56</sup> or as one analyst argued, is “inching towards war.”<sup>57</sup> In Holland, Kosovo, and Macedonia, Erdogan has also engaged in efforts to promote Islamism among Muslim populations, contributing to a destabilization and polarization of society in European nations.<sup>58</sup>

### THE PIVOT TO AN OLD ROGUE: IRAN

*We believe in this: The stronger Iran gets in this region, the stronger Turkey becomes as well, and the stronger Turkey becomes, the stronger Iran gets as well.*

—Turkish Economy Minister Nihat Zeybekci, 11 May 2018.<sup>59</sup>

In supporting Islamist terrorism in Libya and Syria, Qatar and Turkey, the two newly-allied rogues gravitated to an old rogue regime that has long adopted this *modus operandi*: Iran. Tehran continues to support the destabilizing activities of such terrorist organizations as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Bolstered by its new alliance with the strategic rogue states, Iran remains the world’s foremost state sponsor of terror.<sup>60</sup> In opposition to Iran’s further expansion of its sphere of influence into North Africa, on 1 May 2018, Morocco cut ties with Tehran, accusing it of supporting the Polisario Front, a Western Sahara independence movement. Morocco’s Foreign Minister, Nasser Bourita, stated that “Hezbollah sent military officials to Polisario and provided the front with ... weapons and trained them on urban warfare” via the Iranian embassy in Algeria.<sup>61</sup> According to the *New York Times*, citing the conclusions of a United Nations panel, Iran has also “violated an arms embargo imposed on Yemen by failing to prevent the Houthi rebels in that war-ravaged nation from obtaining Iranian missiles, including one fired hundreds of miles into Saudi Arabia two months ago.”<sup>62</sup> This new axis of rogue states also cemented its alliance with trade agreements. On 27 November 2017, Turkey, Iran, and Qatar formally agreed to facilitate trade movements among the three countries. Provisions were made to facilitate sea and land transport to expand trade relations among the signatories, with Iran acting as a transit country for trade between Qatar and Turkey.<sup>63</sup> According to the director of the Qatar Ports Management Company, Qatar also plans to invest in the development of Iran’s southern ports to help expand economic cooperation and increase bilateral trade. According to Mohammad Al-Khanji: “Qatar has long-term plans to increase trade ties with Iran and invest in its southern ports, which

have an economic advantage for both countries. ... We firmly seek expansion of bilateral relations and nothing can change our strategic decision for expanding ties with Iran.”<sup>64</sup> Like the Qatari and Turkish regimes, the Iranians were enhanced by the administration of President Obama, which viewed Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood as a centerpiece for American foreign policy *vis-à-vis* the Muslim world—an approach that backfired spectacularly for both American and European foreign policy interests, as well as the local Muslim populations across MENA who largely reject political Islamism as being desirable for their nations’ futures. As Stephen A. Cook has described it:

Erdogan didn’t make it easy for Obama; Turkey often still acted more like a frenemy than a friend. In May 2010, the country teamed up with Brazil to negotiate a nuclear deal with Iran—but without approval from Washington, which scuttled the whole agreement. Weeks later, Turkey voted against a new round of United Nations sanctions against Iran.<sup>65</sup>

Obama’s misplaced support was reserved not only for Qatar and Turkey’s Sunni Islamists. A groundbreaking investigation published by *Politico* in December 2017 revealed that, in order to secure its heralded Iran nuclear weapons deal, the Obama administration blocked a long-running and far-reaching Federal Bureau of Investigation probe into Hezbollah’s international organized crime network, called Project Cassandra, “even as [Hezbollah] was funneling cocaine into the United States.”<sup>66</sup> Earlier that year, in May 2017, *Politico* had revealed findings of another groundbreaking investigation in Iran, showing that the Obama administration had thrown a “monkey wrench” into the U.S.’s own Justice Department–led counterproliferation effort, in addition to releasing Iranian-born prisoners who posed a threat to U.S. national security:

Through action in some cases and inaction in others, the White House derailed its own much-touted National Counterproliferation Initiative at a time when it was making unprecedented headway in thwarting Iran’s proliferation networks. In addition, the POLITICO investigation found that Justice and State Department officials denied or delayed requests from prosecutors and agents to lure some key Iranian fugitives to friendly countries so they could be arrested. Similarly, Justice and State, at times in consultation with the White House, slowed down efforts to extradite some suspects already in custody overseas, according to current and former officials and others involved in the counterproliferation effort.<sup>67</sup>

This approach to the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists, Sunni or Shia, inevitably and ultimately blew back and derailed American foreign

policy goals and advantages. Turkey and Qatar have now gone rogue, supporting terrorist proxies in MENA while allying themselves with Iran:

In fact, what followed from the special relationship was a nightmarish Arab Awakening. We did not manage events at all with Erdogan in Egypt. Instead, we were fooled into promoting the anti-democratic Muslim Brotherhood (a “largely secular” group according to James Clapper), whose rise led to the counter-coup of the anti-Islamist General Sisi. We destroyed Libya, leading to the logical trajectory of the Benghazi disaster.<sup>68</sup>

In Libya, the Obama administration’s commitment to the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood and its backers continued even after the attacks on the American consulate in Benghazi and came at the expense of democracy and peace. Explaining Qatar’s sponsorship of extremism, the Emir of Qatar said “radical Islamists whose views were forged under tyrannical governments could embrace participatory politics if the promise of real democracy and justice of this year’s Arab revolts is fulfilled. If so, I believe you will see this extremism transform into civilian life and civil society.”<sup>69</sup> However, when Libyans voted out the Islamists in their 2012 and 2014 elections, the same Islamists, far from transforming their extremism into peaceful civic values, refused to accept the democratic will of the Libyan people. With support from Qatar and Turkey,<sup>70</sup> which continued to arm and finance the Islamists, they proceeded to violently remove the secular government from Libya’s capital, forcing it to flee to the eastern city of Tobruk. Plunging the country into failed state status<sup>71</sup> and making national reconciliation impossible, the radicals created their own unelected government, the now defunct General National Congress. The little discussed context to the current conflict is the game-changing support the Obama administration gave to Libya’s Islamists who not only lost the elections but also violently removed the secular Libyan parliament from its seat in Tripoli. This proved to be the single and most pivotal impediment to democracy and conflict resolution in the North African state, midwifing its fracture, facilitating its failure, and making it a hospitable haven for the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS, and other Islamist and organized crime networks in the country.

## IMPEDIMENTS AND SPOILERS TO PEACE IN LIBYA

*Half a truth is worse than a whole lie.*

—proverb

*Fahmy’s case is one more piece of evidence that the al-Jazeera seen by English-speaking audiences is not the al-Jazeera seen throughout the Muslim world. It’s one more piece of evidence that Qatar’s foreign policy*

*is a double game: It hosts a military base the U.S. uses to fight terror, while funding a media platform for extremists.*

—Eli Lake

As the conflict in post-intervention Libya perpetuates, policymakers in the United States continue to be given testimonies by experts and pundits that distort context and omit salient facts that are pertinent to American security concerns and are carefully tailored to present a pro-Islamist narrative that compromises American and European threat perceptions. These narratives, provided by experts and mainstream media figures, closely echo Islamist narratives and further their objectives, making them functional, if not unwitting, allies. This lack of reliable non-partisan counseling by policy influencers which led to what former President Obama described as “the biggest mistake” of his presidency still exists, extending the conflict in Libya to the benefit of Islamists and transnational organized crime networks in North Africa.

The most significant ways by which the narrative surrounding the Libyan conflict is reframed to serve Islamist policy goals to win Western political support are the following: the omission of the results of Libya’s two previous elections to distort context; the misrepresentation of Libya’s most important forces in combating Islamists; and the conferring of false legitimacy on the unelected militias in Tripoli by making them security partners of the equally unelected but appointed Government of National Accord. The 18 April 2018 hearing on Libya by a subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs can serve as an example. Featuring the subject, “Libya Fractured: The Struggle for Unity,” three individuals were invited to provide expert commentary: Christopher Blanchard of the Congressional Research Service; Frederic Wehrey of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; and Alice Friend Hunt from the Center for Strategic and International Studies.<sup>72</sup> Only a few days before the subcommittee hearing, Wehrey’s book on Libya, *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya*, was published wherein he blithely describes Abd al-Hakim Belhaj, Qatar’s man in Libya,<sup>73</sup> as a “businessman and politician.”<sup>74</sup> But Belhaj was in fact among the founders of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), later designated by the U.S. State Department and the United Nations as a terrorist organization with links to al-Qaeda.<sup>75</sup> The LIFG was also described by the British Home Office as “part of the wider global Islamist extremist movement, as inspired by al Qaeda” whose goal is to “replace the current Libyan regime with a hard-line Islamic state.”<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, the LIFG was removed from the list of terrorists by the Obama administration on 9 December 2015.<sup>77</sup> On 24 May 2017, Salman Abedi, initially radicalized by his links to the LIFG,<sup>78</sup> would detonate himself at a Manchester, England, concert, causing 22 deaths and 512 injuries.

Alice Friend Hunt, who testified at the hearing, has referred to Commander Khalifa Haftar as “the powerful self-appointed military commander who controls the eastern half of the country in collaboration with the Tobruk-based House of Representatives.”<sup>79</sup> Her description of Haftar as “self-appointed,” easily shown to be inaccurate, betrays how Western analysts in influential think tanks can get even the most basic facts about Libya wrong. A false qualifier attached to the description of a government-appointed commander is also designed to strip both commander and the democratically-elected government of their legitimacy, an effort in which the Islamist losers of the Libyan elections have been invested since their major upset in the 2014 elections. Rather than being “self-appointed,” Commander Haftar was appointed by the democratically-elected House of Representatives, Libya’s only legitimate and recognized parliamentary body.<sup>80</sup> Even the BBC had pointed out that “in May 2014 Haftar launched Operation Dignity against Islamist militants in Benghazi and the east. In March 2015 Libya’s elected parliament, the House of Representatives (HoR)—which had replaced the GNC [General National Congress]—appointed him commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA).”<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, the term “self-appointed,” which is also interchangeable with “self-styled,” became a term that was quickly picked up and repeated by “copy and paste” journalists, further contributing to the fog of war and the obscurantism that benefit the Islamists, and handicap the threat perceptions of European and American policymakers.

Even Mary Fitzgerald, a journalist who has been reporting on Libya since 2011, has fallen into the trap of misrepresenting facts that unwittingly bolster the Islamist agenda. For example, on 9 May 2018, Fitzgerald tweeted: “ICC says it expects to soon issue more arrest warrants in Libya. Prosecutor again calls for surrender of three—Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, ex regime’s Tuhami & LNA’s Werfalli—already issued with arrest warrants.”<sup>82</sup> Yet, a simple investigation revealed that Werfalli had left the Libyan National Army a year earlier, on 15 May 2017. According to the Atlantic Council’s “Eye on Isis in Libya,” an institute that painstakingly monitors the Libyan security theatre and provides weekly updates on all of Libya’s many actors, “on 15 May, Mahmoud Werfalli, a controversial commander of the LNA-aligned Saiqa Special Forces, issued a TV statement submitting his resignation from the LNA, along with some of his comrades.”<sup>83</sup> Earlier that month, following the rumors that spread of Haftar’s death, Fitzgerald insinuated that UNSMIL was being dishonest<sup>84</sup> when it announced that it communicated with General Khalifa Haftar,<sup>85</sup> suggesting that even journalists of Fitzgerald’s caliber can easily fall prey to the “fake news” psychological operations (“psych ops”) campaign orchestrated by the Islamists to demoralize and destabilize the people of Libya.<sup>86</sup> Fitzgerald’s use of language and punctuations in her

Twitter posts is a common literary device for insinuation while seemingly maintaining an aura of neutrality. A review of the media reports in that period shows that Fitzgerald was not alone, and the sources of fake news on Libya were not new. The Libyan al-Ahrar TV, which is based in Turkey and was funded by Qatar in 2011,<sup>87</sup> was the news outlet that first began to spread the fake news, which was later spread by Al-Jazeera and other agencies.

Illustrating the effectiveness of the Islamist fake news apparatus in manufacturing and spreading false intelligence, Western-based analysts have published commentaries discussing “Libya after Haftar” and his “weakening position” as though it were fact.<sup>88</sup> Even *The Economist* had published a report on 28 April 2018 that Haftar was “nearing the hereafter,” that “his grip on eastern Libya is faltering and his allies are scrambling to find a successor,” and declared his apparently impending death as “a stunning fall for one of Libya’s most powerful and polarising figures”<sup>89</sup>—only to have Haftar return to Benghazi on 26 April very much alive, two days before the article appeared in print.<sup>90</sup> Not only was Haftar not in “a coma,” he soon announced, on 6 May 2018, that “the zero hour has struck for the liberation of Derna,” and the Libyan National Army then launched an offensive against that jihadist stronghold.<sup>91</sup> According to a 2017 nation-wide public opinion survey of Libya by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), 68% of Libyans express confidence in the LNA, making it the Libyan institution enjoying the highest level of support from Libyans.<sup>92</sup>

Those who benefit most from major distortions of the Libyan context by analysts and journalists are the Islamists—both violent and non-violent—as exemplified by the rumored death of Haftar. Spreading across the world it sought to ignite political chaos. Under the command of Khalifa Haftar, and with the aid of United Arab Emirates and Egypt, the LNA had reversed the expansion of jihadist influence in Libya’s strategic oil crescent and is considered to be the biggest obstacle to the Islamist goal of turning the oil-rich country into their own “ATM machine” and to re-establishing their strategic North African stronghold from which to launch attacks on Europe and MENA.<sup>93</sup> In response, AQIM labeled Haftar an “enemy of Islam” and urged Libyans to fight him:

We call on you to unite to remove the symbol of treachery and apostasy, Khalifa Haftar ... the traitor Haftar has launched a war against Islam on the pretext of fighting terrorism. We warn our Libyan brothers that the criminal Haftar is carrying out a crusader plan against *sharia* carrying out a crusader plan of fighting terrorism. We warn our Libyan brothers.<sup>94</sup>

Alice Friend Hunt’s choice to mischaracterize the Libyan House of Representatives as “Tobruk-based” rather than “elected” is just one example

of how most contemporary discussions on Libya omit a central fact inconvenient to the Islamist narrative of “rival governments.” Libya has already held two elections, one in 2012 and another in 2014, in which the Islamists lost each time. After the rebels, with the support of Qatar, removed Gaddafi in October 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood, hitherto foreign to the native Libyan religious scene, emerged as the country’s biggest Islamist party. As Cameron Glenn outlines in *Libya’s Islamists: Who They Are—And What They Want*, in order to run in the March 2012 elections, the Muslim Brotherhood formed the Justice and Construction Party while Belhaj created the Watan party. Much to the dismay of the Islamists and their patrons in Qatar and Turkey, however, the National Forces Alliance, a loose coalition of secular and independent groups, won 64 seats—the largest bloc at the GNC, the centerpiece of Libya’s new parliamentary rule. The Brotherhood’s Justice and Construction Party took 34 seats, while other Islamist groups won 27, a total of 61 seats.<sup>95</sup> But the Brotherhood’s support fell drastically once its elected members entered parliament. Libyans blamed the country’s stalled reconstruction on the Islamists’ partisan in-fighting, while secular politicians and journalists exposed the Brotherhood’s and its affiliates’ links to violent extremist groups. The Muslim Brotherhood then performed even worse in the 2014 elections, winning a mere 25 out of 200 seats.<sup>96</sup> Despite a huge Qatari-funded election campaign, Belhaj’s Watan Party won only a single seat.<sup>97</sup> Rather than accepting the results of the elections, the Islamists staged a violent coup against the democratically-elected government, forcing it to flee to Tobruk. Libya has only one elected government; the rest are not elected. However, instead of supporting that elected government, the Obama administration attempted to sideline it. This stance is at the root of today’s Libyan schism.

As explained in the International Crisis Group’s comprehensive report on why the now expired and flawed Libyan Political Agreement must be amended, Eastern Libyans resented the fact that, after the 2014 elections in which the Islamists failed miserably, Western policymakers only nominally accepted the House of Representatives as the country’s legitimate parliament while “running to defend the interests of their friends in Tripoli and Misrata, who had actually lost the elections.”<sup>98</sup> This distrust was further justified by the UN Security Council’s refusal to lift the arms embargo on the Libyan National Army and its refusal to recognize the parliament-appointed heads of the Central Bank and National Oil Corporation.<sup>99</sup> These actions economically crippled the East of Libya and rendered it completely vulnerable to ISIS and Islamist expansion. As an academic interviewed by the Crisis Group said, “It is dismaying that the international community supports the Tripoli armed groups and politicians there who lost the elections. Don’t they get it that we don’t support them?”<sup>100</sup>



By supporting the unelected Islamist militias over the democratically-elected government, Western policymakers perpetuated the conflict and the country's division, gave rise to ISIS in Libya, and cemented the human trafficking and organized crime networks in the west and south of Libya. As Wolfram Lacher asserts:

Western governments and the UN share responsibility for the state of affairs in Tripoli. They tacitly backed the establishment of the militia oligopoly in a mistaken belief that this would allow the GNA to govern and establish its authority. The gradual re-establishment of the Western diplomatic presence in Tripoli also lends support to the militia cartel. A change of direction is urgently required. The UN should mediate between the stakeholders in and around the capital and attempt to negotiate new security arrangements. These arrangements cannot wait for progress in the political process to happen; in fact, they are a precondition for such progress.<sup>101</sup>

Another precondition for peace in Libya is elections. Recognizing their inability to win democratic elections, the Islamists have long been rallying against elections in Libya and have been employing stalling tactics. After the announcement by the Libyan Quartet calling for elections,<sup>102</sup> a suicide bomber blew himself up inside the headquarters of Libya's election body in Tripoli, killing 12.<sup>103</sup> The attacks illustrate both how little control the foreign-appointed GNA has over the militias in Tripoli and the importance of pursuing democracy in Libya regardless of spoilers and saboteurs. Free elections must take place in Libya as soon as possible, given that any further delay further entrenches the symbiotic network of Islamists and organized criminals. In fact, a nationwide household survey published by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) on 28 February 2018 showed that a large majority of Libyans feel that the political situation in Libya has deteriorated over 2017, have little faith in the political dialogues, and that Libyans value having elections and would participate in future elections.<sup>104</sup> Citing their latest poll, UNSMIL also stated on 8 November 2018 that elections are necessary for the liberation of Libyans from ineffective and increasingly illegitimate authorities and that 80% of Libyans insists on having elections.<sup>105</sup> The United States and Western powers must also be prepared to enforce the democratic results of the elections and rebuild trust among conflicting parties, a crucial element in successful negotiated settlements and making peace last.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, the now-expired Libyan Political Agreement must be either renewed and significantly amended to integrate the actual facts on the ground or abandoned altogether. Furthermore, as emphasized by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, the militias in Tripoli that are involved in human trafficking and smuggling should be given no further lifeline or allowed to

rebrand and gain legitimacy through their co-option by the UN backed Government of National Accord. They must be disarmed, demobilized, and re-integrated into the Libyan National Army under the next democratically-elected government.<sup>107</sup>

## THE QUEST FOR STABILITY

*Muslim majority countries must take the lead in combatting terrorism and radicalization around the world ... if we're going to conquer extremism and defeat the forces of terrorism together, I know Saudi Arabia will be at the front of it.*

—U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo

In 2016 Libya's rank on the UN's index of human development fell to 102nd from 53rd in 2010.<sup>108</sup> Almost half of Libyans require protection and humanitarian assistance.<sup>109</sup> In the west of Libya, Islamists continue to fight the elected government and each other, maintaining a hotbed of radicals and Islamists who stage and coordinate attacks not only on neighboring Tunisia and Algeria, but also in Europe, the Sahel, and the Middle East. Libyan weapons, along with Libyan jihadi fighters, were smuggled to join Qatar's other terrorist proxies in Syria, such as al-Nusra, many of whom later defected to ISIS. Weapons proliferation from Libya continues to fuel regional conflicts. Slavery has been revived in Libya, and old human trafficking and smuggling routes have reopened, forming a symbiotic nexus of terror and organized crime. For the European Union, the refugee crisis stemming from the conflicts in Libya and Syria was exploited by a revived right-wing, threatened relative solidarity among the EU's member states, and even contributed to Britain's decision to leave the EU (Brexit).<sup>110</sup> Unless new and effective pro-security and pro-democratic policies are adopted to restore stability in Libya, these crises will continue to threaten and ultimately degrade the already tenuous security environment in Europe and MENA.

An opportunity to restore peace in Libya was lost in 2014 when the Obama administration chose to sideline the secular, democratically-elected government in favor of the Islamists and their state sponsors. Understanding the lessons of this mistake will be the key to conflict resolution, not only in Libya but in the wider region. The time to combat extremism in North Africa and MENA has never been better, as the tectonic shift represented by the new Saudi leadership of Mohammed bin Salman has disavowed the Gulf Kingdom's long-running support for Islamism. To counter the strategic sponsoring of extremism today by the new Axis of Terror, a powerful and historic movement in North Africa and the Middle East is seeking to shift away and free itself from political Islamism and to adopt a model of governance best embodied by the example of the United Arab Emirates—a

country committed to preserving Islamic traditions and combating the political Islamism that not only targets Americans and Europeans but, first and foremost, victimizes fellow Muslims.<sup>111</sup> According to recent polls, ISIS now has almost no popular support in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon. Among Egyptians, a mere three percent express a favorable opinion of ISIS.<sup>112</sup> Another poll shows that most Arab youth do not favor rule by Islamists, preferring instead the model of governance found in the UAE.<sup>113</sup> In the North African countries of Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco, Islamist organizations have been rejected outright when elections take place. In Saudi Arabia, the anti-Islamist, pro-women's rights reformation campaign of Mohammad bin Salman is wildly popular among the country's youth. According to the ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey 2018, a huge majority of both Saudi and Arab young people between the ages of 18 and 24 from across the region support bin Salman's policies and leadership: 91 percent approve of Prince Mohammed's appointment as the Kingdom's crown prince; 90 percent believe the prince is taking Saudi Arabia in the right direction; 97 percent believe the crown prince to be a strong leader; and 64 percent of youth across the MENA region also agree that the crown prince is a strong leader. More significantly for policymakers outside MENA, the same survey found that both Saudi and Arab youth outside of Saudi Arabia overwhelmingly support bin Salman's anti-corruption drive: 94 percent of Saudi youth support his campaign, 89 percent in the GCC, 85 percent in North Africa, and 83 percent in the Levant.<sup>114</sup> As Bernard Haykel, Professor of Near Eastern studies at Princeton University, explained: "To make sense of the numbers, one has to appreciate the context today of the Arab world and of the kingdom in particular. ... There is a deep and broad desire across these societies for reform, and the youth see MBS [bin Salman] as the most engaged agent in its transformation."<sup>115</sup>

Western policymakers must likewise appreciate the new context of the MENA region, and seek democratic and secular partners in MENA rather than superimposing in power Islamist organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood that act as ideological incubators for terrorism rather than as legitimate partners for progress, peace, and development. Though the Muslim Brotherhood does have a base of supporters, it is no different than ideological groups of the Left and Right across Europe and the United States that likewise enjoy a base of supporters. The Brotherhood's support by a portion of the Muslim population must not be mistakenly translated by outside analysts and policymakers as a sound or ethical reason to regard the group as a representative, desirable, or viable partner in resolving the developmental and security deficit in MENA. The Counter-Extremism Project details both the historical and contemporary ties among the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS, and al-Qaeda:

Before ascending to the highest positions of ISIS and al-Qaeda, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Osama bin Laden, and Ayman al-Zawahiri belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood, which served as a bridge, as it does today, between young Islamists and more violent jihadist groups. As the progenitor of the modern Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood underpins the belief system that fuels al-Qaeda and ISIS. The groups share ideological roots in the writings of the late Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb, and while their public-facing strategies differ, their similarities far outweigh their differences.<sup>116</sup>

To resolve instability in North Africa and halt the advance of violent Islamist networks in Europe and MENA, Western policymakers must combat and contain the New Axis of Terror, as embodied by the alliance of new and old rogues: Qatar, Turkey, Iran, Sudan, and their many proxies. In addition to sanctions and diplomatic pressure, containment strategies must include the provision of logistical and political support of forces and populations that resist political Islamism and pursue and respect democratic elections. Legitimacy in Libya must come from the Libyan people themselves and not superimposed by outside powers aligned with groups which resort to violence when they fail at securing legitimacy by the ballot. Authority without legitimacy, as the un-elected and foreign-appointed GNA has demonstrated, cannot last. Worse, at the expense of Libyan conflict resolution and economic development, the GNA showed that foreign-appointed governments, in an attempt to preserve their allocated rather than earned power, are willing to self-servingly compound their own illegitimacy by cooperating with other illegitimate elements, such as the militias and organized criminals in Tripoli. Furthermore, terrorist proxies of the new and old rogue regimes must be combated both militarily and ideologically. In an age of fake news, where the media can act as an integrated tool of warfare, Western policymakers must perform due diligence in assessing media and analytic products that can compromise their threat-perception and decisionmaking on the strategic Libyan frontier—both for Libyan and international peace and security.

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