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Driving Out ISIS From Libya: What Lies Ahead?

By Ahmad Saiful Rijal Bin Hassan and Mohamed Sinan Siyech

Synopsis

Libyan forces with US air support are driving out Islamic State fighters in Libya. Still the oil-rich nation is deeply divided by rival factions and armed militias.

Commentary

LIBYAN FORCES are close to securing victory over militias from IS, also known as ISIS, in the city of Sirte, the hometown of the late leader Muammar Gaddafi. The city has been under ISIS control since early last year. Currently, with the support of US air strikes, ISIS fighters have been cornered in a small section of Sirte.

According to US Defence Secretary, Ashton Carter, it is just a matter of time before ISIS is eliminated from Libya. This anticipated victory against ISIS will however be temporary and celebrations will be premature as Libya faces an even tougher challenge - uniting fragmented factions.

Deeper Tensions

The battle of Sirte has proved to be a test for unity among warring factions in Libya. Currently, the Misratans hailing from the city of Misrata west of Sirte and the Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) militias from the areas east of Sirte are fighting against ISIS. Both of these militias had previously battled each other and are expected to continue to fight even after the ouster of ISIS fighters. The Misratans have already declared that they are ready to take over Sirte and will head to the capital, Tripoli, the stronghold of the UN-backed government, General National Accords (GNA).

The GNA recently suffered a setback after getting a vote of no-confidence from a rival government, House of Representatives (HoR), which is based in the eastern city of Tobruk. Meanwhile, other rival militias across the country are carrying out extrajudicial killings to demonstrate their power as territories and oil ports are being seized. The most recent incident is the takeover by the Libyan National Army (LNA) commanded by Khalifa Hefatar, of oil fields belonging to the PFG.

The seizure has caused some instability in the Libyan politico-military landscape. The takeover may result in the diversion of the PFG's attention from the fight against ISIS. Also, LNA's failure to join in the liberation of Sirte, and ISIS' defence and counter-attacks, has led to the anti-ISIS operations being protracted.

Moving Forward Post-ISIS

A post-ISIS Libya does not guarantee stability in the current scenario. It is uncertain if the fighting among the Misratans and PFG will cease or if the two governments, the HoR and the GNA, will agree on any settlement or collaboration. These uncertainties have caused a fair amount of confusion and disorder in the country, caused by the LNA's refusal to submit to the GNA's authority. This is because the LNA is the strongest force that can help to integrate the various militias into the governmental forces and stabilise the situation in Libya.

Thus the eventual elimination of ISIS, while necessary, is not the end of Libya's political quagmire. There has to be political reconciliation between the different factions before there can be any improvement in the security situation or attention paid to economic development. Libya will also have to look beyond its oil industry because it is usually the target in any attempt to destabilise the oil-dependent government. Trying to diversify its earnings from other sectors will help to mitigate its economic problems, although it will be a long process.

Beyond Libya's Borders

At the regional level, Egypt's military support for General Hefatar, whose spokesperson has announced the group's intentions to export oil in the Egyptian currency, adds another level of complication. These trade relations only highlight the expanding relations between the two parties. This is also supplemented by General Hefatar's amenities granted to the Egyptian government which were not authorised by his superiors, the HoR. General Hefatar's collaborations with Egypt will therefore mean that seeking Egypt's support will now be crucial to bring about stability in Libya.

The neighbouring countries of Tunisia, Algeria, Chad and Niger will also have a part to play due to the influx of incoming militant refugees. Although Tunisia closed its borders with Libya in June 2015, it was reopened soon after. Such steps would not have helped much in stopping cross-border human smuggling, especially given that there are many established routes between these two countries.

At the international level, the United States and the United Kingdom will have a vital role to play financially and politically. Although the US has weighed in on Libya by

launching air strikes since August 2016, there are other ways that the US will be expected to help. The most important will be to integrate all the different local militias into the GNA which also requires the help of the UK.

This could become slightly easier than before due to an increase in the GNA's legitimacy after the expected victory over ISIS; however there are still many more security as well as political and economic issues that will have to be looked at before these steps can be implemented.

Ahmad Saiful Rijal Bin Hassan is a Senior Analyst and Mohammed Sinan Siyech is a Research Analyst with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg