

Joseph E. Fallon reports

While there have been some positive developments, over all the military and political situation in Libya continues to deteriorate. The victories that have been achieved against Islamic Extremism in Libya have been more tactical than strategic, more temporary than permanent.

For instance, the main al-Qaeda affiliate in Libya, Ansar al Sharia (Partisans of Islamic Law), which at the height of its power in 2012, was "viewed as the most disciplined and feared" with an estimated 4,500-5,000 fighters, formally disbanded in May after suffering military defeats and decimation of its leadership.

However, the end of Ansar al Shariah is not the end of al-Qaeda's presence in Libya. Libya is a conservative country and the most tribal in the Middle East. "The problem with connecting too many "dots," however, is that virtually everyone in Libyan politics is just three or four degrees of separation from al-Qaeda."

Al-Qaeda's strategy in Libya, as elsewhere in the Middle East, has been pragmatic, subtle, and focused on the long-term. "For years, analysts have debated what al-Qaeda is...there is "confusion about whether Al Qaeda is best understood as a centralized organization; a network of like-minded organizations; or merely an Internet-enabled ideology." Since the Arab Spring, another option has been to understand al-Qaeda as a snake willing to shed its "brand" when it becomes toxic. In practice, that means al-Qaeda has been willing to support local groups that have dropped the al-Qaeda name." So one is not sure of how many of the militias operating in Libya are al-Qaeda sympathizers.

The same is true concerning the military victory over Daesh (ISIS) in the coastal Libyan city of Sirte. As reported March 24, 2017 by the Military Times, "Marine Corps Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, the head of U.S. Africa Command...Speaking to media at the Pentagon, indicated...the ISIS presence in coastal Libya has fallen below 200 from an estimated 5,000 or 6,000 only a year ago."

The organization was defeated in Sirte, but not destroyed. Its military power was diminished, but

not extinguished. Daesh has retreated south to Fezzan to regroup and can jeopardize western interests through guerrilla warfare sabotaging Libya's oil facilities and ports and through calculated use of terror to unleash a mass migrations of people to destabilize neighboring countries and Europe. It remains a formidable threat to the West. At present, a threat more powerful, more organized, and more direct in Libya than al-Qaeda. With a youth unemployment rate approaching 40%, Daesh has a pool of disaffected people from which to recruit. Currently, "250,000-350,000 armed men have fallen in with radical groups."

While sharing common assumptions, al-Qaeda and daesh are political rivals pursuing different tactics and strategies which more recently has included hurling accusations against one another.

"The similarities between the al-Qaeda and ISIS narratives include the focus on the obligation to perform jihad by all able-bodied Muslims. In both al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's publication Inspire and ISIS's Dabiq the concept of abandoning or abstaining from jihad while proclaiming to be Muslim is seen as hypocrisy. Both organizations also portray the West (particularly the United States) and its allies as nations that are hostile to Muslims. Al-Qaeda and ISIS both frame their ideologies within the conception of Dar al-Harb (house of war) and Dar al-Islam (house of Islam), which, within the Salafi literalist context, asserts the incompatibility of Islam with secular law and governance."

"The critical difference between the two groups that needs to be a key factor in counternarrative strategies concerns their ultimate aims. While al-Qaeda portrays itself primarily as a militant group—a covert, almost Delta Force-like organization of specialized fighters and operational masterminds—ISIS's narrative draws on the discourses of state building and governance, with a more established goal of creating and managing a Utopian state..."

The instability of two rival governments in Libya, the UN backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli and the House of Representatives (HoR) in Tobruk has benefited Islamic Extremists, and daesh in particular, giving the latter time to regroup and exploit tensions between Tripoli and Tobruk to its advantage.

While the U.S., U.K., France, and Italy say they support the UN backed GNA in Tripoli, they have been, at the same time, assisting "Field Marshall" Haftar of the rival government in Tobruk in his war against the GNA.

The rationale for covertly supporting Haftar was the belief that he was an effective force fighting Daesh. In reality as the analysis in Mediterranean Affair noted, "Every day, it appears more clear that more than an anti-Islamist war, it is effectively becoming a clean way to bring every opposition down."

Despite the military victory of forces loyal to the UN backed GNA in defeating Daesh in Sirte, militarily, the stronger of the two rival powers now appears to be "Field Marshall" Haftar. On June 9, 2017, Reuters explained how this came to be.

"Emirati assistance that violates a U.N. arms embargo has significantly boosted air power for forces loyal to Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar, a report by U.N. investigators published on Friday said. Air power has helped Haftar's eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA) gain the upper hand since last year in Libya's conflict between rival groups vying for power. Haftar's self-styled Libyan National Army has extended its control over towns, military bases and oil facilities in eastern and central Libya since last year. Air power has played a key role in those advances, analysts say."

As of June 4, 2017, the forces of "Field Marshall" Haftar now control "all the major cities and military bases in the desert south of the North African country." This is illustrated in the maps at the websites of Critical Threats and Aljazeera.

The previous Obama administration's covert support for Haftar damaged U.S. credibility. First, because Haftar is likely a war criminal. "The UN Special Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have accused Haftar's forces of committing serious human rights abuses and violated international humanitarian law. An official for the International Criminal Court investigating the atrocities in Benghazi has gone so far as to compare Haftar's operations to the war crimes committed by Serb forces in Srebrenica, Bosnia in the 1990s."

Second, because Haftar is an opportunist, not an ally in the fight against Islamic Extremism. After claiming he was rescuing Libya from Islamic extremists, Haftar has allegedly allied himself with IDaesh, if temporarily, to attack GNA forces south of Sirte. On June 2, 2017, Forces of "Field Marshall" Haftar and forces of Daesh launched simultaneous attacks on the forces of UN backed GNA "in the central district of Jufra, south of Sirte."

To end the operations of Daesh, al-Qaeda and other Islamic Extremists in Libya requires the establishment of an internationally recognized and internationally supported unity government for the country. That government exists in the UN backed GNA. It is incumbent upon NATO members, and Egypt, and the UAE to support that UN back government and end their assistance to "Field Marshall" Haftar. No negotiations between Tripoli and Tobruk on resolving political differences and establishing a stable, functioning political system for Libya can be successful otherwise. And the repercussions of overthrowing the GNA and installing "Field Marshal" Haftar as Libya's new strongman would be disastrous for Libya, the region, the UN, and NATO.

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