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Libyan Civil War: Enabling Illicit Migration Flows, Threatening Libya's Neighbors

Only by supporting a long-term political solution to the Libyan conflict can the EU address the migration crisis.

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It is no coincidence that the three boats that capsized in the Mediterranean in April 2015 causing deaths of hundreds of migrants all set sail from Libya. It is estimated that most of more than 36 000 people who tried to cross to Europe in 2015 embarked in Libya and used various routes across the central Mediterranean sea to Italy. Since the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 Libya has suffered from growing instability, factionalism and, since July 2014, increasingly chaotic civil war. The recent conflict has pitted two loose alliances against each other: the first is the internationally recognized government based in Tobruk in the east of the country and backed by the Libyan Army and various militias; the second is the rival administration formed by pro-Islamist forces in the capital Tripoli, which relies on a diverse coalition of armed groups. The situation is further complicated by the presence of various local armed factions and militant jihadists allied either to Islamic State, or Ansar al-Sharia. The failed post-Gaddafi transition and ensuing civil war have crippled state institutions and fragmented political authority. Combined with porous borders, this situation has allowed flourishing people smuggling networks to operate with impunity and created problems for Libya's neighbours.

Analysis: State collapse facilitates human smuggling and creates regional instability

Dealing with the migration crisis in the Mediterranean requires action to deal with the Libyan internal conflict. However, the country has multi-faceted fault lines stemming from various political, economic, tribal, regional and ethnic grievances. The rival governments in Tobruk and Tripoli have nebulous leadership structures and rely on informal agreements meaning that politicians often wield less influence on the ground than the leaders of powerful armed groups. The hopes of some Western analysts that the emergence of Islamic State in Libya would unite the rival factions – in the face of a common enemy – have yet to materialize and the cohesion of each camp has also decreased due to mounting internal tensions.

The on-going collapse of Libyan state has already enabled further growth of criminal networks that exploit the lawless and insecure situation to smuggling various goods and drugs, as well as people. In many cases, these networks are connected to larger armed groups, important warlords and local politicians and in recent months these types of connections have also started to emerge in the Northern coastal cities, helping to facilitate irregular migration. The entrenchment of the shadow economy within the political and societal sphere poses important challenges for future reconciliation and the longer it remains in place, the more it will hinder the fight against human smuggling and drug trafficking.

The collapse of the Libyan state has not only facilitated organized crime and people smuggling, but has also created another refugees crisis, as the increased violence since the start of fighting in summer 2014 has forced more than 400

000 Libyans to leave their homes. Another more than million of Libyans then reside in neighboring Tunisia. The situation is also dire for the foreign workers from sub-Saharan Africa who remain trapped in the country and for whom the dangerous and costly trip to Europe is one of their only options to escape – if they can afford it.

Continuing conflict and state failure also poses threats to and imposes burdens on Libya's neighbours: the attack on the Bardo museum in Tunis was conducted by people trained by jihadists in Libya; the barbaric killings of Egyptian Copts in Libya, provoking Egypt to retaliate with air-strikes and a mass exodus of Egyptian workers, was carried out by the local branch of Islamic State; and the recent seizure of an Italian fishing boat – an unprecedented act of piracy in the region in modern times – was perpetrated by armed Libyans.

Outlook: Danger of spillover and need for international involvement

Driven by multiple societal cleavages and fuelled both by oil money and by the proceeds of the organised crime it facilitates, the Libyan civil war is unlikely to end quickly without external involvement. Encouragingly, the UN mediated talks between the two sides appear to be making cautious progress and will soon be expanded to include several of the most significant armed groups. However many obstacles to reaching and implementing an agreement remain, including the role of Khalifa Haftar, the influential commander of the Tobruk government's armed forces who led the coup against the government in February 2014.

Nevertheless, the need for the agreement and formation of new unity government is pressing. Income from oil exports – the only meaningful revenue that the country currently has and the thing most groups are fighting over – are dropping and the Libyan Central Bank might be soon forced to cut consumer subsidies and salaries of government workers. That would mean further disintegration of remaining state institutions and rising appeal of various militias and organized crime groups. A clear incentive for agreement thus exists.

The likelihood of such an agreement would be boosted by increased European involvement, which would also support EU aims in the Mediterranean and help address the migration crisis. Increased Search and Rescue activities and the possible (and problematic) destruction of smuggling boats may address the symptoms of the crisis but only finding a political solution in Libya would address one of its causes and key channels.

Recommendations:

◆ **The European Union and its member states** should put their full diplomatic weight behind the UN mediated peace talks by using its leverage with foreign backers of both camps (Egypt, UAE, Turkey and Qatar) and providing diplomatic help to the constructive actors (Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco) who are seeking a peaceful solution.

◆ At the same time the **European Union** should discontinue its policy of only dealing with the Tobruk government and provide positive incentives in the form of development projects and aid for *both sides* linked to the continuation of the peace process or local ceasefires, as well as providing negative incentives through targeted sanctions against specific spoilers of the peace process.

◆ The **EU and its member states** should create further incentives for peace and support the rebuilding of Libyan economy and oil production through targeted projects that would, in the longer term, reduce the appeal of trafficking and organized crime. This should be accompanied by the similar involvement in the neighboring countries, especially in the Sahel, through which the people and goods are smuggled into Libya.

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