

Libya needs international assistance, not drone attacks

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Two years to the day after the anti-Gadhafi uprisings began in Benghazi, the populace has again taken to the streets. This time they are protesting the new authorities failures to bring economic development and its prerequisite, security. Over the last two years, wide swathes of Libyan territory have been transformed into a non-governed space has indirectly facilitated the Islamist takeover in Mali and the attack by Al-Qaeda affiliates on Algeria's In Amenas gas facility. If Libya is the fabled 'gateway to Africa', then the gate has been left wide open.

In today's Libya, heavy artillery and extremist militants flow across the country's porous borders with ease. Since the killing of U.S. Ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens, Libya's extreme east is currently being monitored by American drones in search of jihadist training camps.

Barack Obama wisely pledged in his recent State of the Union address to help Libyans "provide for their own security" including cooperation on counterterrorism. However, should the promised "direct action against those terrorists who pose the gravest threat to Americans" turn out to be code for conducting drone attacks on Libyan soil, then the president is on the verge of a catastrophic blunder which would irrevocably jeopardize vital American economic and strategic interests.

Libya urgently needs international assistance in building its institutions, especially the basic machinery of government and security. The Libyans have a friendly government, infinite money to spend on infrastructure projects, and they are actively soliciting Western assistance. Clearly, nation building – which the Libyans are even able and willing to fund themselves - would be far more effective than drone strikes at eliminating terrorist safe havens. It would be more cost effective as well.

The drone infrastructure

Currently, U.S. surveillance drones focus on the Islamist hot spots in Eastern Libya (Derna, Benghazi, and the Green Mountains) due to the obsession with finding the perpetrators of the attack on the American mission which killed the Ambassador. Plans for a forthcoming U.S. unarmed drone base in Niger will make it operationally feasible to employ drones against militant extremists in Libya's southwestern region of Fezzan. This area is beginning to rival Yemen as one of the globe's premier ungoverned spaces and a site of heavy arms trafficking. If the use of drones in Libya should gradually switch from unarmed surveillance to armed attacks it would anger the heretofore friendly Libyan populace and likely incite revenge attacks against the West. In the wake of such attacks, Libyans would likely close ranks with the extremists in their midst and refuse Western capacity building assistance, which they otherwise support.

Life in a dangerous neighborhood

Instability in the Sahel can only undermine Libyan efforts to secure its borders. In retrospect, the attack against the In Amenas facility appears to be part of a broader strategy by al-Qaeda and its affiliates against energy facilities and Western interests in North Africa. Al-Qaeda affiliates are now involved in an undeclared war with Bamako, Algiers, and Tripoli for control of the Sahel.

The French campaign has dispersed the most hardcore jihadist elements from their previous redoubts in Mali, but they are presently finding safe havens among the Sahara's other ungoverned spaces -- awaiting the appropriate moment to make their next move. February 8th's guerilla-style suicide attack in Gao is a possible indication of the tactics that appear to be spreading. Attacks like those at In Amenas or Gao lacked extensive preparation or a unified command and hence, even with good intelligence -- they are impossible to forecast or preempt. So long as Libya's southwestern border is an ungoverned space, it will be impossible to win a counterinsurgency campaign in the vast empty space of the Sahara. The logic of drone strikes to disturb terrorists in

this area holds a certain appeal for an administration that has decimated al-Qaeda leadership in the Af-Pak region, yet it is the wrong policy choice. In the Sahel, fighting fire with fire is not the right strategy.

Only a stable and secure Libya will prevent the indefinite spread of this contagion and a likely series of attacks against North Africa's oil installations and drone counterattacks against terrorist training camps.

Finishing what we started in Libya

A succession of various threats in Benghazi over the past month have made it quite clear that foreign diplomats, NGOs, and investors will remain at risk in Libya so long as the authorities are unable to govern outside of the capital. There is a palpable fear that the General National Congress' February 6 decision approving the direct election of members of the constitutional assembly on a regional basis will lead towards federalism and the disintegration of the Libyan state. These worries are coming to a head as mass anti-government demonstrations are planned in Eastern Libya for Friday, February 15 -- the second anniversary of the Libyan revolution.

If Libyans and Westerners want to see a free, open, and democratic Libya capable of being part of the community of nations and a vital engine for growth in the global economy, they cannot let Libya drift towards lawlessness and separatism. Libya's international partners, especially the U.S., Britain, and France need to complete their commitments to support Libya in establishing the rule of law, transitional justice, and security. To this end, the major Western and Arab powers unveiled a security plan in Paris on February 12 calling for European experts to train Libyan security forces and rebuild the military. Crucially, this effort has the backing of the EU, UN, Arab League, African Union and the government of Libya.

Time to deliver on training

Until now foreign training of the Libyan army, police, and border guards has been small in scale. Most training has largely been conducted outside of Libya, in Jordan and Turkey. The U.S. for its part has discussed possible training of around 400 military special forces, but has not yet committed to firm details about the program. These positive cooperation measures are incomplete steps upon which we must rapidly build.

The new Libyan security plan announced on February 12 moves the location of training inside Libya, calling for a two-year EU border security training program using civilian trainers starting in June 2013. This plan should aid in dismantling the dysfunctional, militia-dominated Supreme Security Committee and Libya Shield Force. However, military, police, and border security training should only form part of a broad capacity building and vocational training package urgently needed to promote a stable and secure environment. This is the best way to get needed job skills to former fighters.

Libya should be a top-tier U.S. foreign policy priority.

A broad multilateral effort to prevent Libya from becoming a failed state can only succeed with the U.S. as a key and proactive partner. Ignoring or attacking Libya with drones would be a truly counterproductive policy that would worsen the devastating effects of instability in North Africa and the Sahel perpetuating the downward spiral of violence, the loss of foreign investment, and the proliferation of weapons through ungoverned spaces. Instead of drone strikes, Secretary of State John Kerry should go to Libya as part of his first Middle Eastern trip. While there, he should unveil a vast training scheme to help build a new Libyan army and provide it with on the job training in border security. America must follow through on its commitments in order to cultivate a valuable regional partner in Libya and prevent the Sahel region from becoming the next Afghanistan.