The Path Forward in Libya

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Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, Committee members, I am grateful for this opportunity to speak with you about Libya's worsening security crisis and the next steps for U.S. policy.

I have just returned from two weeks in Libya, where I saw firsthand the country's humanitarian plight, political divisions, and growing vulnerability to the self-proclaimed Islamic State. I spoke to the young militia fighters who are on the frontlines against the Islamic State. I heard stories from the victims of its atrocities. What struck me most is that Libya's fragmentation and the devolution of power—to armed militias, tribes, and towns—has created a power vacuum that the Islamic State is exploiting. This dissolution makes it exceptionally difficult for the United States and Western powers to intervene.

There is no national military command through which the United States and Western allies can channel counterterrorism aid. Perhaps more worrisome is that many of Libya's factions are still more focused on viewing each other as more of a threat than the Islamic State. Many are using the danger posed by the Islamic State as a pretext to wage war against local rivals over political power, turf, and economic privilege. A great risk is that outside intervention against the Islamic State, before a cohesive government is formed, could exacerbate political conflicts, bolster the power of local militias, and throw the country into greater turmoil.

To be sure, the growing threat of the Islamic State demands a forcible response, above all from Libyans themselves, backed by Western support. That assistance is likely to involve special operations forces—who are reportedly already on the ground—liaising with, training, and advising Libyan units, backed by aircraft using precision-guided munitions. But any strategy to tackle the Islamic State should first aim at bridging Libyan political divides and providing aid in a way that promotes cooperation between rival military forces.

The Islamic State and Libya's Political Vacuum
Since the summer of 2014, the Islamic State has exploited a governance vacuum within Libya, expanding their reach from what was once just a toehold into a foothold. It has clashed with, and in some areas displaced, older jihadist groups affiliated with al Qaeda. It has used Libya's lawlessness to attract foreign recruits, conduct training, and plot operations abroad. The Islamic State now controls the central coastal city of Sirte and is attacking the nearby petroleum facilities to prevent much-needed revenue from reaching Libya's central bank. In the western city of Sabratha it took over a logistical hub to train Libyan, Tunisian, and other foreign combatants to fight in Syria. More recently, it has sent hundreds of fighters from Iraq and Syria to Libya in a calculated fallback strategy; the total number of Islamic State fighters in Libya is estimated to be between 3,000 and 6,500.

For Libyans and Western governments alike, the biggest obstacle to confronting the Islamic State is Libya's political fragmentation. The country is split into two loose constellations of armed actors. The first is the Tripoli-based õDawnö coalition, which comprises Islamist fighters and militias from the western part of the country. The second is the õDignityö umbrella, which is drawn from eastern tribes, federalists, some western militias, and Qaddafi-era officers recruited into a self-styled õLibyan National Armyö led by General Khalifa Hifter.

In the past year, internal power struggles have fractured these two groups to the point that they exist only in name. Worse, both have been so focused on preventing rivals from gaining ground that they've allowed the Islamic State to expand, often cynically using the terrorist group's presence to accuse their adversaries of collusion. Even in instances where regional militias agree on the Islamic State threat, their distrust of each other has hampered military effectiveness on the ground. For example, I recently spoke to several fighters from Sabratha who told me that competing interests between pro-Dignity and pro-Dawn forces— drawn from Sabratha's rival tribes and surrounding towns— had undermined the effort to root out Islamic State radicals.

Representatives from the two sides recently signed a UN-brokered agreement to form a unity government which, Western officials hope, will soon issue a formal invitation for military assistance. But the unity agreement is fragile and incomplete, having been pushed through under Western pressure despite resistance from key local players. The Presidency Council, the executive body established by the agreement, has started to falter before even having managed to form a government. Unless it can obtain the formal support of Libya's two rival legislatures and take office in the capital Tripoli, the unity government will be widely perceived as a Western puppet and a "third government."

Even if the new government does overcome the initial hurdles, it will quickly face the daunting task of re-establishing centralized military command and building loyal, integrated units out of a collection of disparate militias. A key stumbling block is Hifter's continued presence as commander in chief of the Libyan National Army. The Dignity camp's failure to remove him gives fuel to rejectionists in the rival camp and precludes the creation of a single chain of command under the new government. The loose alliance that Hifter leads is itself rife with divisions: the majority of his forces in Benghazi are not uniformed army troops but irregular neighborhood and tribal militias.

The Risks of A Proxy Strategy
Western military strategy against the Islamic State is proceeding along two paths: a training program to stand up new army units loyal to the government and a counterterrorism effort focused on providing assistance to those forces on the ground that are most capable and most willing to confront the Islamic State. Neither path offers a remedy to the problem of factionalism in Libya's security sector— and both could make matters worse.

The training program is based on the flawed premise that Libya lacks skilled fighters. In fact, it has lacked governments capable of bringing skilled fighters under a centralized command. A Western training effort in 2013–14 to build a national army— the so-called general purpose force— failed because there was no national military structure for recruits to join. Those recruits that did complete the training returned to Libya and were either put on leave or melted back into militias. Another training program risks repeating this error, unless the new government agrees on a roadmap for building a unified and professional military. In the best-case scenario, such efforts would result in a reliable military for future governments to use. But it would not offer an immediate response to the urgent Islamic State threat.

In the meantime, Western governments will seek to back existing forces against the Islamic State. And that is where the problem lies. By liaising with and assisting armed groups against the Islamic

State, Western special operations could empower factionalism and reduce the incentives for political reconciliation. Already, this appears to be happening with the recent advances of Libyan forces under General Hifter in Benghazi. In addition, navigating the patchwork of competing militia claims will be a daunting challenge. In setting up a physical presenceô a training camp or an operations centerô on the turf of a particular armed group, Western special operations forces could create the impression of partisanship, causing rivals to seek out counterbalancing alliances.

This danger is especially dire in Sirte and surrounding areas. The most powerful militias equipped to liberate Sirte from Islamic State control are from the nearby coastal city of Misrata. But an explicit American and European partnership with Misrata would antagonize key familial segments of Sirteøs population, who in 2011 suffered abuses when Misratan militias overran the territory. By the same token, simultaneous Western support to militias to the east of Sirte, such as the Petroleum Facilities Guard under Ibrahim Jadran, could end with those militias turning their guns on their Misratan rivals in a scramble for the regionøs oil resources.

Focus on Political Unity and Local Military Coordination
Counterterrorism assistance in Libya must reinforce the building of inclusive political and security institutions. A key priority should be to support the establishment of integrated structures and units in the security sector. At the political level, that will require intensive engagement to overcome the standoff over the army leadership and promote cooperation between representatives of rival camps in the Presidency Council, its government, and the military command.

On the ground, the West must tie assistance for the fight against the Islamic State to a process of integration of armed groups. To be eligible to receive counterterrorism support, for example, armed groups should accept the unity government and subordinate themselves to its national command structure. But that wonøt be enough. To avoid destabilizing the country, Western military assistance must also include the establishment of coordinating mechanisms between Libyan military forces on the ground. These could include command centers between militias on a regional basis, with the aim of gradually creating centralized command structures and, eventually, dissolving local militias into consolidated army units. Western advisers should encourage militias from Misrata, Ajdabiya, and southern Libya, for example, to cooperate with army officers from Sirte to lead the offensive against the Islamic State in the city.

Regional command centers would be staffed by local army officers, militia commanders, and foreign special operations advisers who would facilitate the transfer of intelligence, de-conflict ground movements with airstrikes, and, perhaps most importantly, act as neutral political arbiters. For such assistance to work, Western statesô France, the United Kingdom, and the United Statesô will need to coordinate their efforts closely. They will also need to ensure that regional military forces from Egypt, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates support this strategy and do not attempt to set up parallel advisory and assistance channelsô these statesø previous meddling has been deeply partisan and unhelpful in both combating the Islamic State and resolving Libyaøs civil conflict.

Above all, Western involvement in Libya should be geared toward supporting the unity government, which will need to back any efforts to promote battlefield coordination among regional militias. No single group should receive assistance unless it is considered both neutral in

local power struggles and loyal to the unity government. Further, if the government makes progress on re-unifying command structures, Western assistance should flow through a national chain of command, rather than directly to regional coordination centers. Of course, if the Presidency Council remains paralyzed by internal divisions, or the agreement collapses, the Western-backed regional coordination centers will have no chance of ever evolving into a foundation for an integrated military. At the very least, however, the strategy will reduce the risk that military assistance will widen political rifts and contribute to the failure of the unity government.

Alarmist assessments of the Islamic State in Libya should not lead to a hasty and heavy-handed intervention. The Islamic State may be expanding its presence in Libya, but it has not been able to tap into the popular discontent of broad segments of the populationô yet. Unlike in Iraq or Syria, the Islamic State cannot prey on sectarian fears in Libya. It has not shown an ability to set up durable governance structures in areas it controls. Libya still has multiple societal and political actors capable of and willing to fight back against the group. The Western approach should work carefully to ensure that it harnesses and unifies these actors rather than dividing them.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.