



NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

STRATEGIC TRENDS

February 2015

MAGHREB

Islamic State disrupts dialogue in Libya

After last months' worrying signals and the bloody attack against the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli, in February terrorist activity reached its apex in Libya, with devastating effects both on internal and external fronts. The Islamic State (DAESH) media apparatus diffused a video showing 21 Egyptian Copts beheaded on the shores of Tripoli (15th of February). The Copts were kidnapped by militants in two separate raids, in December 2014 and January. The execution was claimed by the 'Wilayath Tarabulus' branch of the DAESH, which has announced the creation of the new provinces (wilayath) in Libya: Wilayath Tarabulus in Tripolitania, Wilayath al-Barqah in Cyrenaica and Wilayath al-Fizzan in Fezzan.

On the same day, Islamic State (also known as Dawla) militants captured the town of Nawfaliyah and seized several buildings in Sirte, including radio and television stations, and a passport office. In addition to the stronghold of Derna, where the Islamic Youth Shura Council pledged allegiance to the Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2014, the jihadist group now controls different cities in Libya, extending its influence over the country.

The Islamic State expansion in Libya caused an international outcry, considering the current threat posed to European countries, including Italy in the latest threats. Moreover, the Copts' execution caused an Egyptian reaction, which the following day (February 16th) bombed DAESH's targets in Libya in retaliation. Egypt's air force, joined by jets from Libya's 'Operation Dignity' (which supports the House of

Representatives – HoR – in Tobruk), killed about 40-50 militants in Derna, adding more fuel to fire. On February 20th three car bombs hit the eastern city of Qubbah, killing 40 people and wounding 70, targeting a petrol station, the local security headquarters and the town council. An online statement by Dawla apparently claimed the attack.

Terrorist violence disrupted the dialogue between the HoR and the legitimate government in Tobruk, and the General National Congress (GNC) in Tripoli. United Nations' efforts were bearing positive results: after Geneva negotiations in January, talks resumed in Ghadames with the GNC ending its boycott and attending the session, although there was no direct contact between participants.

Tripoli's representatives agreed to issues already approved by the legitimate government in Geneva last month, such as a government of national unity, a ceasefire and disarming militias. A new round of talks was agreed for the end of the month in Morocco, but the Qubbah attack represented a turning point: HoR voted for suspending its participation, blaming the rival government in Tripoli for not condemning the terrorist attack.

As a consequence of the Islamic State penetration in Libya, different regional and international powers asked for a military intervention to eradicate the terrorist threat, possibly under a United Nation mandate. Many countries have probably overrated the threat and hence are reinforcing their defence preparedness and increasing their alert levels. For the time being, for obvious historical reasons, it appears unlikely that a military intervention can be led by Italy, despite being the country with more stakes in the crisis. Also the United States lack apparently the will to put boots on the ground, given Washington's military engagement against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. A major terrorist attack against European countries or interests from the Libyan branch of the Islamic State could obviously change this general trend.

Advocated mainly by Egypt (for internal reasons and for its *rôle de prestige* in the region), United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia (tenaciously opposed to Islamist parties and especially to the Muslim Brotherhood), an outside intervention in Libya could only worsen the social and political crisis of the country. Moreover, it could completely derail negotiations between the main factions and provide the jihadist militants with a safe haven for staging terrorist attacks against Western countries.

Tunisia's national unity

In Tunisia the main political event was the formation of a national unity government. Following the critics and the threat of rejection of his first proposal, Prime Minister Habib Essid of Nidaa Tunes was forced to

reach an agreement with the Islamist party Ennahda in order to obtain the 109 seats needed for a majority in parliament. The new government coalition, made up also by the Afek Tounes party and the Union Patriotique Libre (UPL), obtained a confidence vote on February 5th with 166 votes in favour, more than all the previous Tunisian governments since 2011.

Despite this political success, Essid and his 24 ministers will face difficult tasks in the next months. Unemployment remains high at 15% and the trade deficit increased to \$7,2 billion, about 8,9% of GDP. Even though the Prime Minister announced a new 5-year economic plan and a focus on the energy issue (with particular attention to the renewable sector), instability and violence caused a sharp decrease in foreign direct investment (FDI), which fell to around \$1 billion.

The cutting of subsidies on basic goods is unpopular, thus forcing the government to recur to alternative sources of income or saving. However, the foreign traveller tax angered Tunisian citizens on the border with Libya, especially in Ben Gardane and Dhiba, where one protester was killed by the police forces. It is likely that attempted economic reforms and austerity measures by the new government will produce more riots in the coming months.

Terrorist recruitment ongoing in Morocco

Morocco's authorities continued to put under strict surveillance terrorist activities. The Direction Générale de la Surveillance du Territoire (DGST) arrested an Islamic State terrorist in Beni Drar. The man, an Algerian national member of the Jund al-Khilafa terrorist group, was in possession of dangerous chemical products. Moreover, in collaboration with the Spanish Centro Nacional de Inteligencia (CNI), the authorities dismantled a terrorist group active in Fnideq, Ceuta and Melilla, which recruited exclusively women in order to send them to Syria and Iraq.

During 2014 there were more than 300 people indicted for terrorism activity in Morocco, more than the double compared to 2013. It is foreseeable that in the next months the Jund al-Khilafa terrorist group, affiliated with the Islamic State, will increasingly project its presence in Morocco. The group's main objective is to create a Caliphate across the Algeria-Morocco frontier, following the example of the Islamic State.