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The wider implications of the US airstrikes in southern Libya

In September 2019 the US resumed counterterrorism operations against the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL) in Libya. From the 19th of September onwards, the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) launched four airstrikes, killing 43 militants, most of them near Murzuq. The timing of the operations is significant. In August the UN Secretary General António Guterres said that the ongoing conflict in Libya is providing terrorist organisations with the opportunity to regain strength and resume their activities. Briefing the UN Security Council, Guterres said that ISIS comprises approximately 500-700 militants. The group is led by Mohammed al-Barasi, who was allegedly targeted in the airstrikes. Social media sources also reported the death of Malik Khazmi a senior leader of the group active in recruiting militants and facilitating the activities in the south.

The offensive on Tripoli launched by General Khalifa Haftar has provided terrorists with a window of opportunity to exploit divisions inside the country. The fighting is draining fighters and resources from counterterrorism operations, as both the Libyan National Army (LNA) and the 'Libyan Army Forces' (LAF, affiliated to the Government of National Accord – GNA) have been battling each other on the frontline in southern Tripoli. Furthermore, the fighting also spread to other parts of Libya, including the south, whose shifting sands are a constant source of tensions among ethnic and tribal groups.

In this context, the lack of details provided by AFRICOM over the latest airstrikes raises important questions about the strategy adopted by Washington in Libya. Since August 2019 Murzuq has been under the control of the Southern Protection Force (SPF), a coalition of armed groups mostly composed of Tebu militiamen that ousted the LNA and affiliated tribal groups. The LNA has often depicted the SPF and other Tebu militias as 'Chadian gangs, terrorists and mercenaries' accusing their leader, Moussa al-Hassan al-Teboui, of being in contact with jihadist groups active in the region.

As conflicting narratives emerge over the terrorist groups active in an area that suffers from the lack of reliable sources, the US airstrikes have implications wider than the fight against ISIS, not only due to the inextricable knot of interests, alliances and affiliations in Murzuq but also because the current conjuncture

of the crisis. For instance, as clashes erupted on the 30th of September between the LNA and ISIS militants fleeing the US airstrikes in the area between Umm al-Aranib and Qatrun, the Khalid Ibn Walid Brigade's support to the LNA forces was noteworthy. Despite having been associated with the LNA since January, the Salafi-Madkhali armed group had reportedly backed the SPF taking control of Murzuq in August. Haftar's forces took advantage of this new about-turn, rebuilding their presence in a contested area, to the detriment of the GNA, despite the fact that the US reportedly coordinated the airstrikes with authorities in Tripoli. The result shows that even the fight against terrorism, apparently enjoying top priority, can produce unintended consequences in Libya's fragmented political and social landscape, resulting instrumental in changing the balance of forces on the ground.

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