

# AFTER THE FALL

Views from the ground of  
international military intervention  
in post-Gadhafi Libya

Alison Pargeter



**REMOTE CONTROL**

Examining changes in military engagement

This report has been commissioned by **Remote Control**, a project of the Network for Social Change hosted by Oxford Research Group. The project examines changes in military engagement, with a focus on remote warfare. This form of intervention takes place behind the scenes or at a distance rather than on a traditional battlefield, often through drone strikes and air strikes from above, with special forces, intelligence operatives, private contractors, and military training teams on the ground.

**Alison Pargeter** is a freelance North Africa and Middle East expert with a particular focus on Libya, Tunisia, Iraq (including the Kurdish region), and Egypt, as well as on political Islamist movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood. Alison is a Senior Research Associate at RUSI (Royal United Services Institute) and has also held a range of academic posts including at the University of Cambridge and Kings College London. She is also a Senior Associate at the global consulting firm, Menas Associates.

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Remote Control  
Oxford Research Group  
Development House  
56-64 Leonard Street  
London EC2A 4LT  
United Kingdom

+44 (0)207 549 0298

[info@remotecontrolproject.org](mailto:info@remotecontrolproject.org)

<http://remotecontrolproject.org>

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Cover image: Fighters for Libya's interim government rejoice after winning control of the Kadhafi stronghold of Bani Walid. Wikimedia Commons, Magharebia.

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## Executive Summary

Libya has been mired in crisis ever since the toppling of the former Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gadhafi in 2011. Foreign intervention – whether overt or covert – by both regional and international actors, including the UK, has exacerbated this crisis and has added further layers of complexity to an already complex situation.

Foreign intervention has generally elicited a negative response in Libya. However, given the extent of the chaos and fragmentation that has gripped the country, the various camps have been willing to accept intervention providing it supports their own interests or objectives. By the same token, when intervention has not suited their objectives, these camps have also used it as a stick to beat their opponents with.

The UK and the rest of the international community appear to have had no long-term strategy for Libya, and in their rush to force through the establishment of the Government of National Accord (GNA) in December 2015, which sanctioned military action against IS, they stirred up further divisions inside Libya.

By backing the GNA, which is viewed by many Libyans as an illegal entity that lacks proper legitimacy, some Libyans have questioned the legitimacy of international military actions in the country post-Gadhafi. In addition, international military intervention has inevitably become intertwined with the local conflict, exacerbating

divisions between local factions, and further complicating and constraining efforts for long-term peace and stability.

Libyans in general are deeply uneasy about the idea of foreign intervention, but also feel abandoned in the wake of the 2011 events. Some feel angry that this abandonment left the country prey to interventions by regional powers.

In particular, the covert nature of Britain's intervention, which was a particular focus of this study, has fuelled suspicions about ulterior motives in a climate already characterised by rumour and conspiracy. Through its choice of partners, Britain has given some locals the impression that it has been backing and deliberately empowering one side in the conflict. This has fuelled feelings of anger and marginalisation among other factions.

## Key Conclusions

1. International actors are “damned if they do, and damned if they don’t” when intervening in a complex factional conflict like that in Libya. In such circumstances, it is almost inevitable that one is drawn into the dynamics of the local conflict, making it impossible to be seen as an apolitical or non-partisan player. It is vital, therefore, to be open and transparent and to have a clear strategy that stands up to local, regional, and international scrutiny.
2. International actors are taking a very short-term approach to security that seems bent on containing the symptoms rather than fixing the causes of violent conflict. While defeating so-called Islamic State (IS) in Sirte was a positive development, the way in which it was achieved has left Libya no closer to attaining peace. Rather, the imposition of the GNA has only served to aggravate violent conflict. Prioritising short-term tactical gain over longer term strategic objectives also fuels perceptions that Britain is only interested in its own agenda and not what is best for Libya or Libyans.
3. British intervention in Sirte has demonstrated that there are long-term consequences of working with particular local groups in the interests of countering IS. Doing so alters the balance of power on the ground, which has the potential to further undermine the prospects for peace. In addition, these groups have their own strategic objectives that may be different to those of the Western backers. By empowering certain factions in this way, such intervention not only creates tensions with other components in the conflict, but also potentially sets off more internal power struggles in place of dialogue and cooperation between groups.

## Introduction

Ever since the uprisings that erupted in Libya in 2011, the country has been locked in crisis. The collapse of what was a highly centralised and personalised regime, even by regional standards, opened an enormous power vacuum that was filled by an array of armed groups and militias which sprang up during, and in some instances after, the revolution. Ongoing competition between these armed groups, coupled with the failure of Libyans to build a new state, left power fragmented and the country steeped in ever worsening chaos and conflict.

Into this mix has been thrown the added complication of foreign intervention – both overt and covert – by various states. From the NATO-led intervention in 2011 that contributed to the downfall of Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gadhafi, to the clumsy drawn-out UN-backed peace process, to the meddling by a host of regional states who have backed different sides in this conflict, Libya has struggled to be master of its own destiny. Indeed, because of the extent of its fragmentation and the absence of any centralised authority, the various factions that emerged out of the chaos have found themselves increasingly reliant on external backers and powers for support and as a means of consolidating their control. Much of the foreign intervention that has occurred in Libya since 2011, therefore, has inevitably become bound up in the local power struggles that are tearing the country apart.

Britain's intervention in Libya since 2011, which was a particular focus of this study, has been no exception to this trend. While the UK worked with its international partners to support the UN-led peace process, backing the formation of the consensus GNA which emerged out of the Libyan Political Agreement that was signed in December 2015, it too has become inextricably embroiled in the battle for control of Libya. Nowhere has this been more evident than in its undertaking of covert military operations in support of GNA-led forces in the battle against IS in Sirte in 2016.

IS succeeded in taking control of Sirte, a coastal town in the centre of Libya, famed for being the birthplace of Muammar Gadhafi, in February 2015. Although the group was never able to expand its territorial presence

much beyond Sirte, there were real fears on the part of the Western policymaking community that as the group came under pressure in Iraq and Syria, it would seek to strengthen its presence in Libya. This, in turn, would place Europe under even greater threat.

Western powers, therefore, did their utmost to help establish and support the new consensus GNA that launched its campaign against IS in Sirte in May 2016. Three months later, the US became more directly involved in the fight after Fayeza Serraj, Chairman of the Presidency Council and prime minister of the GNA, called for the international community to intervene. Although Serraj made it clear that he did not want foreign boots on Libyan soil, he publicly requested US air strikes to support the Libyan troops who were struggling on the ground.<sup>1</sup> The US duly responded and in August 2016 began launching air attacks on IS positions in Sirte.

Britain and Italy, by contrast, preferred to adopt a more discrete approach, assisting Libyan forces in the fight against IS by covert means. Although the exact nature of these covert operations, which are believed to date back to the start of 2016, is unknown, it is clear that British Special Forces played a part by providing intelligence and training for Libyan forces, while media reports strongly suggest they were also active in some combat on the ground.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Al-Serraj warns European powers of IS militants infiltrating to Europe on boats, Libyan Express. 11 August 2016, <http://www.libyanexpress.com/al-serraj-warns-european-powers-of-is-militants-infiltrating-to-europe-on-boats/>

2 See for example, British special forces fighting in Libya: Report, Middle East Eye, 26 May 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/british-special-forces-fighting-libya-report-201027144>; Dramatic moment ISIS jihadis laid down their arms after British special forces helped Libyan fighters flush them out, The Daily Mail, 6 August 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3727370/Dramatic-moment-ISIS-jihadis-laid-arms-British-special-forces-helped-Libyan-fighters-flush-out.html>; WHO DARES PUNISHES SAS troops smash ISIS with new deadly weapon nicknamed the 'Punisher' in a ferocious street battle in Libya, the Sun, 7 August 2016, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/1569070/sas-troops-hit-isis-fighters-with-their-new-deadly-weapon-nicknamed-the-punisher/>



Map of Libya. Image: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 2011

Given the secret nature of these operations, there was little public response inside Libya to Britain's role in the fight against IS. This stands in stark contrast to the outpourings of anger that accompanied some of the other foreign interventions that have taken place in the country over recent years. Revelations that French Special Forces were operating in Benghazi in July 2016 after three French operatives were shot down in a helicopter prompted uproar among certain sections

of the Libyan population.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the US airstrikes against IS elicited an equally angry response in some quarters.<sup>4</sup>

However, the lack of any outward public response towards Britain's role in the Sirte campaign belies some very real and heartfelt concerns felt by Libyans about the nature and impact of this intervention, as well as the extent to which it has fed into the existing conflict.

3 Libyans protest at French special forces presence, RFI, 21 July 2016, <http://en.rfi.fr/africa/20160721-libyans-protest-french-special-forces-presence>

4 Libyan Islamists Raise Criticism of US Airstrikes, VOA, 5 August 2016, <https://www.voanews.com/a/libyan-islamists-increase-condemnation-of-us-airstrikes/3451370.html>

## Methodology

This report is based on the findings of a research project, carried out during 2016-2017, to elicit Libyan views on foreign intervention, and specifically on British covert military intervention in Libya against IS. The project entailed analysing commentary on external intervention in the Libyan print and broadcast media. Sources consulted included prominent Libyan news sites such as Bawabat Al-Wasat (<http://alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/>); Afrigate News (<http://www.afrigatenews.net/>); Libya Al-Mostakbal (<http://www.libya-al-mostakbal.org/>); and EanLibya (<http://www.eanlibya.com/>). Several English-language Libyan sites including the Libya Herald, the Libya Observer, and the Libyan Express were also consulted. Given the ongoing conflict in Libya, some of these sites cannot be considered completely neutral in their reporting and as such should be approached with a degree of caution. However, they still provide valuable insights not only into understanding the ever-shifting situation on the ground in Libya, but also into how foreign intervention has been perceived and received by different components in the conflict.

A number of Libyan websites and social media sites were also assessed for this project including the sites and social media pages of political parties and movements such as the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, the Justice and Construction Party, and the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council among others.

The project also involved conducting a series of semi-structured interviews and distributing questionnaires among Libyans about British intervention in their country.

Due to time and budgetary constraints, as well as the challenges involved in eliciting views on such a sensitive topic in what is effectively still a conflict zone, the sample size is modest with some 40 responses collected. Respondents included journalists, academics, civil society activists, businessmen, officials, Islamist leaders, former ministers and former fighters, some of whom requested anonymity given the tense security situation in the country. Efforts were made to reach out to as broad a range of Libyans as possible, with views drawn from across the political and ideological spectrum, as well as from different cities in Libya. Thus, while the responses are by no means a statistically representative sample they at least provide a small snapshot of how British military intervention is perceived by some Libyans, with some notable trends emerging out of the findings.

## The Libyan Conflict: Key Players

### *The Presidency Council and the GNA*

The Presidency Council is the internationally backed ruling body that sits at the top of the GNA. It was born out of the Libyan Political Agreement that was signed in Morocco in December 2015 and is headed by Fayeza Serraj. This council, which is itself divided, has struggled to impose its authority since its arrival in the capital in March 2016. It has also not been officially approved by the House of Representatives, something required under the terms of the political agreement.

The Presidency Council is backed by a number of powerful armed forces in Tripoli. These include the Special Deterrent Force that is headed by Abdelraouf Kara, and the Tripoli Revolutionaries Council that is headed by Haitham Al-Tajouri. These forces are broadly Salafist Madkhalist in orientation. The Council is also backed by some of the key forces from Misrata.

### *The Libyan National Army (LNA)*

The LNA is headed by Khalifa Haftar, a former military officer in Gadhafi's army who defected in the early 1980s and returned to Libya at the time of the 2011 uprisings. It comprises a loose array of military officers from the former Libyan army, tribesman and local brigades, including some that follow Salafist Madkhalist teachings. It is supported by the leadership of the House of Representatives that was elected in 2014 and that is based in Tobruk.

Following a bloody three-year battle in Benghazi against a host of mainly Islamist forces, the LNA now controls most of eastern Libya, except for the town of Derna. It also controls most of the south of the country, having forced out its opponents in May 2017. Since September 2016, it has also had control of the Oil Crescent, which includes the oil ports of Ras Lanuf and Es-Sida.

### *The National Salvation Government*

The National Salvation Government, which is headed by Khalifa Al-Ghweill, is based in Tripoli and opposes both the Presidency Council and the Libyan National Army. It is supported by Libya's ultraorthodox Grand Mufti, Sheikh Sadiq Al-Gharianni, as well as a number of forces from Tripoli and other western towns, most of them Islamist in orientation. It also has the backing of some Islamist forces from the east, including the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council, which fought against Haftar for control of Benghazi.

The forces that support this government have a presence in Tripoli, where they regularly enter into clashes with those forces that support the Presidency Council.

### *Misrata*

Misrata is a coastal town in central Libya that emerged as a key powerbroker following Gadhafi's ousting in 2011. The powerful Misratan brigades that formed during the revolution have represented a potent force whose influence has extended beyond Misrata, including into the capital and the south of the country. Misratan forces formed the backbone of Operation Libya Dawn, the umbrella group that took over the capital and much of the west of Libya in 2014, for example, and led the fight against IS in Sirte. Until May 2017, when they were defeated by LNA-allied forces, Misratan brigades in the form of the Third Force had control over large parts of the south of the country.

However, Misrata is divided. While some powerful Misratan brigades support the National Salvation Government in Tripoli, others continue to back the Presidency Council. Despite this, these forces share a broad rejection of Haftar, whom they view as the embodiment of the counter revolution.

### *Zintan*

The town of Zintan in the west of Libya also emerged after the revolution as a key centre of power. However, it lost much of its influence in 2014 when it was pushed out of the capital and forced back into the western mountains by Operation Libya Dawn. Zintan is broadly supportive of the LNA, although the town does not come under its command. Its forces appear to have been neutralised of late.

## Background to the current situation in Libya

The toppling of the Gadhafi regime in 2011 threw Libya into chaos. The total collapse of the state combined with the proliferation of armed groups that had sprung up town by town during the fighting and which refused to disband once the regime had been toppled, meant that the institutions of governance that were set up after the revolution were never able to gain control on the ground. Indeed, the country remained in the grip of a vast array of local forces and powerbrokers whose ultimate loyalty lay with their commander, their town or area, their tribe, or in some instances with a particular ideology.

The situation was made worse by the fact that Libya's new institutions failed to properly rebuild Libya's armed forces. The Libyan army, which was already weak under Gadhafi, all but dissolved at the time of the revolution. Despite repeated attempts on the part of successive governments to reconstitute it and to absorb some of the militias into it, these armed groups either resisted becoming part of the state, or agreed to come under the command of the state in a nominal capacity only.<sup>5</sup> This was partly because these forces preferred the power and autonomy of operating in a militia, but also because they viewed the Libyan army as tainted by its association with the past. This was a view shared by many in the political arena, particularly the Islamist currents, who did not want to see the forces of the past put back together again, preferring security to remain in the hands of the revolutionary brigades and forces that had fought on the frontlines to bring the regime down. As a result, the militias continued to call the shots while Libya's new political authorities had no choice but to rely upon these same militia forces for the implementation of security, strengthening them even further. As such, Libya's political institutions were always at the mercy of the more powerful forces on the ground who directed events as they saw

fit. Within this context, new centres of power began to emerge. This included the towns of Misrata and Zintan who became engaged in a protracted power struggle to dominate the capital.

## Two Rival Governments

While the situation was challenging from 2011, things took a decided turn for the worse in the summer of 2014, when revolutionary forces from Misrata came together with allied brigades and militias in Tripoli and other western towns under the banner of Operation Libya Dawn in a bid to force their Zintani opponents out of Tripoli. After several weeks of intense fighting, Operation Libya Dawn triumphed, pushing the Zintani brigades back into the western mountains and leaving the capital, along with most of western Libya, in the hands of those forces that made up this Misratan-dominated alliance. In a bid to give themselves political cover, these forces reinstated the defunct General National Congress (parliament) that had been elected in 2012 but whose term had expired, and appointed a National Salvation Government in Tripoli.

In the east of the country, meanwhile, the House of Representatives, which had been elected in June 2014 to replace the Congress, installed itself in the remote eastern town of Tobruk for its own safety. It then appointed a government of its own from the equally remote eastern town of al-Baida. Unlike the Congress, which was dominated by revolutionary and Islamist elements, the House of Representatives was the domain of more liberal, as well as federalist, elements, who had triumphed in the elections. As a result, the House gained the support of certain forces in the west of the country, including Zintan.

By August 2014, therefore, Libya found itself with two competing authorities, both claiming to be the country's sole legitimate power and both seeking to wrestle control of Libya's national institutions and resources with devastating implications for the country.

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5 Divided We Stand: Libya's Enduring Conflicts. International Crisis Group. 4 September 2012. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/divided-we-stand-libya-s-enduring-conflicts>

## The Role of Khalifa Haftar

While the Congress was propped up by the militias and brigades in the west of the country that had been part of Operation Libya Dawn, the House of Representatives turned to retired military officer, General Khalifa Haftar, for its support. A onetime senior officer in Gadhafi's army, Haftar had defected in the early 1980s, spending much of his life in exile in the US. He returned to Libya during the revolution and stunned the country in February 2014, when he made a televised appearance calling for the Congress to be overturned and that, to all intents and purposes, appeared to be an attempt at staging a military coup. The attempt failed, but Haftar re-emerged in Benghazi in May 2014 when he launched his Operation Dignity campaign that was aimed at ridding the city of Islamist elements who had been in control in Benghazi since the revolution. Although these elements represented a broad range of Islamist ideologies, Haftar lumped them altogether in the name of 'fighting terrorism'. He also made it clear that he intended to eliminate Islamists not only in Benghazi, but across the entire country.<sup>6</sup>

Haftar's Operation Dignity campaign prompted Islamist forces in Benghazi to unite under the umbrella of the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council, and the city was plunged into a bloody and brutal struggle between this council and the various forces and militias that allied themselves with Haftar.

By late 2014 Libya was divided into two broad camps, with the more revolutionary and Islamist elements, as well as Misrata, dominating in the capital and the west of the country, and the more liberal and tribal elements who had rallied behind Haftar and the House of Representatives dominating in the east.

## The Rise of IS in Sirte

As the country descended ever further into chaos, the international community stepped in. In September 2014, the United Nations



General Khalifa Haftar (Image: Magharebia/Flickr)

launched a peace process to try to bring the warring factions together. However, this fraught process, which involved bringing together dialogue teams from both the House of Representatives and the General National Congress, as well as other constituencies, dragged on for many months, with neither side willing to make the compromises necessary for peace. As the negotiations limped along, with participants squabbling over successive texts of a draft power sharing agreement, the country continued to suffer lawlessness and conflict.

It was during this period that IS emerged as a significant force inside Libya. In February 2015, IS took over Gadhafi's birthplace of Sirte after having already taken control of the nearby small town of Nawfaliya, which had a history of Islamist militancy. Many who joined IS in Sirte were local youth who had been part of the militant Islamist group, Ansar Al-Sharia (English: Supporters of Sharia), that was already dominating the town and that had been tasked with providing protection there. These youths clearly decided to hitch their wagon to the IS brand, linking up with

6 The Unravelling, The New Yorker, 23 February & 2 March 2015 Issue. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/23/unravelling>



Islamic State fighters (cropped image: Sequence Media Group/Vimeo)

a number of foreign militants, to form the first proper manifestation of IS as a territorial power in Libya.

Over the course of 2015 and into early 2016, IS expanded its presence in the Sirte area, taking over several surrounding towns and villages. It also carried out a string of deadly suicide attacks in various locations, including in Qubba and Zliten, as well as around Misrata. It launched hit and run attacks against energy infrastructure in Libya's Oil Crescent.

However, IS was never able to really expand its territorial control beyond Sirte and its immediate surroundings. Despite this, an IS presence on the southern shores of the Mediterranean rang alarm bells for many European states. This IS presence, coupled with the increasing flows of illegal immigrants who were using Libya as a transit to get to Europe, prompted European powers, along with the US, to focus their attentions more urgently on resolving the crisis in Libya. In particular, the international community wanted an institution inside Libya that it could work through in order to tackle these two thorny issues, which the Libyans were clearly unable to deal with themselves. Indeed, the international community needed

a governing body inside the country that could sanction the provision of external military support in the fight against IS.

As a result, the international community pressed harder than ever to get Libya's warring sides to strike a deal to form a consensus government under the auspices of the UN backed peace process that could serve as such a vehicle. As journalist David Hearst commented in December 2015, "Before bombing can start, Britain and France need to be invited to intervene by Libya itself. That cannot happen unless there is a nominal government of national unity. It does not have to meet. It simply has to exist as a virtual entity. Here then lies the answer to the rush to create a national unity government. Its first act would not be to start a process of national reconciliation. Nor indeed embark on the quest for national security. It would be to rubber stamp another foreign intervention."<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, in February 2016 British Ambassador to Libya, Peter Millett, summed up the situation by stating, "If you do not have a government, what can you do about

<sup>7</sup> The West wants unity in Libya so it can bomb it, David Hearst, Middle East Eye, 16 December 2015 <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/bomb-libya-first-think-later-1469136420>

ISIS [IS]? I do not think we have an answer. If the whole thing collapses we will be into a very difficult situation. It will be difficult to deal with ISIS without a formal request from the Libyan government.”<sup>8</sup>

### The GNA: A Troubled Start

Under intense pressure, therefore, and after many months of fraught negotiations, representatives from both the House and the Congress finally agreed in December 2015 at a meeting in Skhirat, a small town in northern Morocco, to sign a political agreement that would launch new national political structures, including a GNA that was to be headed by a Presidency Council.

Unsurprisingly, the signing of this agreement was hugely controversial. The leadership of both the House and the Congress rejected the deal and disowned those elements from their own institutions who had signed up to it, arguing that they had acted without proper consultation or permission. The agreement was also rejected by many of the forces on the ground, some of whom resented what they viewed as international interference in Libyan affairs. This included some of the more hardline Islamist factions in the west of the country, who were unwilling to accept the agreement or the government it spawned.

The pro-Haftar camp in the east was also firmly opposed to the agreement, and especially to Article 8 of its Additional Provisions. This article gave the new Presidency Council rather than the House of Representatives powers over senior appointments, including powers in the military and security sectors. Given that the Presidency Council would inevitably comprise individuals from the west of Libya who would not countenance Haftar having any role in these new structures, the adoption of this agreement effectively barred Haftar from having ultimate control over the country’s military and security apparatus. The leadership of the House of Representatives refused, therefore, to



Libyan Prime Minister Fayez Sarraj (image: US Department of State)

approve the political agreement or the government it spawned, both of which were requirements of the agreement itself.

Despite this resistance from the strongest power broker in the east as well as from many of the forces on the ground in the west, the international community forged ahead regardless, establishing a nine-member Presidency Council that began working out of Tunis in January 2016. On 30 March 2016, this Presidency Council relocated to Tripoli, arriving by boat because some of the militias that opposed it had closed Libyan airspace. Indeed, such was the hostility towards this Presidency Council by some of the militias in the capital that it was forced to operate out of a heavily protected naval base in the Bu Sitta area of Tripoli.

However, some of the forces operating in the west of the country, including some of the large Misratan brigades, which had formed the backbone of Operation Libya Dawn, welcomed the new government and, in what was a largely opportunistic move, sought to present themselves as the official security bodies of the state. Although they continued

<sup>8</sup> West 'can't fight Isis in Libya without a unity government', the Guardian, 9 February 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/09/west-cant-fight-isis-in-libya-without-a-unity-government>

to operate with autonomy, these forces backed the Presidency Council and provided it with protection. As with previous ruling institutions, therefore, the Presidency Council found itself reliant on militias over which it had no real control. As the head of the Presidency Council, Fayeze Serraj lamented in November 2016, "They [the militias] do as they please... Whenever they want to go out and fight, they don't ask us and we end up firefighting these battles."<sup>9</sup>

Serraj's comments relate to the fact that these forces which gave their support to the Presidency Council have engaged repeatedly in clashes with those forces that are opposed to it. Those in the latter camp include many of the more hardline Islamist forces, who look to Libya's ultraorthodox Grand Mufti, Sheikh Sadiq Al-Gharianni, as a spiritual reference, and who support the National Salvation Government in Tripoli. These two groups have been engaged in a protracted turf war for control of the capital since the Presidency Council's arrival, reflecting the fact that rather than resolving Libya's conflict, the creation of this Council simply added another layer of complexity to it.

### The Fight Against IS

Once installed in Tripoli, the Presidency Council quickly turned its attentions to dealing with IS. Despite IS having seized control of Sirte in February 2015, until this point there had been little real effort invested in trying to counter the group. Shortly after the initial takeover, the reinstated General National Congress dispatched Brigade 166, from Misrata, to tackle the problem. But this poorly equipped and ill-trained brigade remained on the outskirts of Sirte, preferring to focus its energies on trying to persuade the town's elders to convince IS fighters to disband.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, neither Congress nor

Misrata, which was just 230 km west of Sirte along the coast, made any serious attempt to deal with IS.

This lack of effort didn't mean that Misrata wasn't concerned about the IS presence, but rather that it did not view it as the most pressing priority. Many factions in Misrata, along with many in the capital, viewed Haftar as a far bigger problem than IS or its precursor in Sirte, Ansar Al-Sharia. As the head of one Misratan television station expressed in early 2015, "This is about priorities: we first have to defeat Haftar and then get rid of Ansar al-Sharia."<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Misratan MP Fathi Bashaga told the media around the same time that the danger posed by Ansar Al-Sharia was "greatly exaggerated" and was "something that we'll deal with later on."<sup>12</sup>

By spring 2016, however, things were changing. Firstly, Misrata was becoming increasingly concerned about the IS presence, particularly as the group had succeeded in carrying out a number of suicide attacks near to the city, such as those at Abu Grain, that is considered to be Misrata's eastern gate, in May 2016. Misrata also feared that IS had sleeper cells inside the city that could be activated at any time.

Secondly, and more importantly, the establishment of the Presidency Council shifted the whole political arena and represented new opportunities for Misrata. With Haftar turning his back on the Presidency Council, Misrata saw this as an opportunity to throw its weight behind this new internationally backed body, enabling it to present its forces as the official forces of the state. Furthermore, by leading the fight against IS on the Presidency Council's behalf, Misrata could gain both local and international legitimacy while getting rid of what had become a troublesome opponent in Sirte. On 5 May 2016, therefore, the Presidency Council announced the establishment of a joint military operations room known as Bunyan Al-Marsous, which comprised mainly senior commanders from

9 Serraj blames Haftar, Saleh, Elkaber and Ghariani for Libya's problems. Libya Herald. 2 November 2016. <https://www.libyaherald.com/2016/11/02/serraj-blames-hafter-salah-elkaber-and-ghariani-for-libyas-problems/>

10 Libya Focus. June 2016. Menas Associates. Subscription only publication available at [www.menas.co.uk](http://www.menas.co.uk)

11 Quoted in Libya's downward spiral, Alison Pargeter, openDemocracy, 9 February 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/alison-pargeter/libya%e2%80%99s-downward-spiral>

12 Ibid



Global Coalition: Meeting on the Defeat of ISIS in March 2017 (image: US Mission Korea)

Misrata. The Bunyan Al-Marsous launched its campaign against IS on 12 May 2016, with Misratan forces both leading the battle and forming the bulk of its forces.

### **International Involvement in Anti-IS Operations**

Despite these forces making rapid progress against IS, retaking areas and pushing the group back into the town of Sirte within a matter of weeks, the process of actually ousting IS was proving a far more onerous task. With IS fighters dug deep inside Sirte, along with those civilians who had remained in the city, Misratan forces found themselves drawn into difficult urban fighting which they were not properly trained to deal with.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the Presidency Council requested help from outside Libya, and from August 2016 the US provided air power to support Libyan forces on the ground. But given the sensitivities surrounding foreign intervention, Serraj was clear that he was not calling for foreign troops to fight on the ground, telling the media, “We do not need foreign troops on Libyan soil... Our men can manage alone

<sup>13</sup> The Battle for Sirte: An analysis, Libya Herald, 7 November 2016, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2016/11/08/the-battle-for-sirte-an-analysis/>

once they have cover from the air. I only asked for US air strikes which must be very precise and limited in time and geographical scope, always carried out in coordination with us.”<sup>14</sup>

Although there were some objections to this US assistance, it enabled the campaign to advance and on 17 December 2016, Sirte was finally declared free of IS, eight months after the battle had been launched.

As for Britain’s involvement in this Sirte campaign, the exact nature of its role is still unknown. However, various media reports that emerged during the course of 2016 certainly point to a British military presence in the area. In February 2016, the Sunday Times reported that UK Special Forces were working alongside their US counterparts in Misrata, citing western officials who stated that a “small number” of British troops were present on a low-key mission.<sup>15</sup> In March

<sup>14</sup> No Need for Foreign Troops on Libyan Soil Says Unity Government, The National, 10 August 2016, <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/no-need-for-foreign-troops-on-libyan-soil-says-unity-government>

<sup>15</sup> Special Forces on Secret Libya Mission Against IS, the Times Live, <http://www.timeslive.co.za/thetimes/2016/02/29/Special-forces-on-secret-Libya-mission-against-IS1>



AV-8B Harrier takes off from the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit to conduct airstrikes against IS targets in Sirte, Libya in 2016 (image: US Navy photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Nathan Wilkes)

2016, a leaked memo recording the details of a meeting held between King Abdullah of Jordan and US congressional leaders in January that year, stated, “His Majesty [King Abdullah] said he expects a spike in a couple of weeks and Jordanians will be imbedded [sic] with British SAS, as Jordanian slang is similar to Libyan slang.”<sup>16</sup> In April 2016, the Express newspaper reported that British Special Forces were working as “advisers” within a joint special operations force which had been tracking IS fighters using drones and surveillance spy planes operating out of Cyprus. The newspaper quoted a senior military source who explained, “Our people have been on the ground in Libya for some weeks, albeit in an advisory role, but the mission has now changed.... They are under US command as part of a Joint Special Operations Force and their mission is to

<sup>16</sup> REVEALED: Britain and Jordan’s secret war in Libya, Middle East Eye, 25 March 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/revealed-britain-and-jordan-s-secret-war-libya-147374304>

target enemy forces in a series of precision strikes so that Sirte can be liberated by Libyan army personnel.”<sup>17</sup>

On 9 May 2016, meanwhile, Tariq Al-Juroushi, a member of the House of Representatives’ defence and security committee, told the Libyan media, “There is an Italian operations chamber in Misrata and it is assisted by British forces. We know that and I confirm that.”<sup>18</sup> The same month, The Times cited Mohamed Durat, a commander in Misrata, who explained, “My unit works just with English.... I have met with them personally and they have destroyed two suicide vehicles that were targeting

<sup>17</sup> ISIS ON THE RUN: Time is running out for Jihadis as SAS plan major offensive, The Sunday Express, 24 April 2016, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/663841/ISIS-Jihadis-SAS-major-offensive>

<sup>18</sup> Jeroushi: Ghurfat Eamaliat Italiya-Britaniya fi Misrata... Wa’idha Hajamu Jayshana Sanuqadihim Duwaleean. [Jeroushi: An Italian-British Operation Room in Misrata... If Our Army is Attacked, We Will Sue them Internationally], El-Watan News, 09 May 2016, <http://elwatannews.com/news/details/1157369>



British Prime Minister David Cameron (right), NTC Chairman Mustafa Abdul Jalil (centre) and French President Nicholas Sarkozy (left) in Benghazi, Libya following overthrow of Gadhafi (image: Number 10/ Flickr)

my fighters.”<sup>19</sup> The Times reported how on 12 May 2016, a suicide vehicle that was heading for Misratan soldiers was destroyed by what was believed to be a Javelin missile fired by either the SAS or SBS.<sup>20</sup> In July 2016, a fighter called Almen told the Middle East Eye, “IS call their suicide bomb vehicles ‘dogma’ and they are often reinforced with bullet-proof steel. I was fighting side by side with the British when they destroyed one of these.... We were shooting at it with all our weapons but even our missiles made no impact. But the British guys had a gun

with bullets that melt through the armour. When they hit it, the dogma exploded immediately.”<sup>21</sup>

In August 2016, Durat was quoted again, explaining, ‘We co-ordinate with the Americans and British. When they are targeting a site we move back, they strike, and we move forward further. Together we can complete this mission.’<sup>22</sup> In the same month, a local commander told the media in relation to a gun battle, “The British arrived in a very purposeful way, as if they had specific information about ISIS positions, and took

19 British special forces fighting in Libya: Report, Middle East Eye, 26 May 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/british-special-forces-fighting-libya-report-201027144>

20 British special forces destroyed Islamic State trucks in Libya, say local troops, The Telegraph, 26 May 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/26/british-special-forces-destroyed-islamic-state-trucks-in-libya-s/>

21 EXCLUSIVE: British soldiers 'fighting IS on frontlines near Libya's Sirte', Middle East Eye, 15 July 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sirte-libya-british-commandos-frontline-uk-britain-michael-fallon-islamic-state-669841059>

22 Dramatic moment ISIS jihadists laid down their arms after British special forces helped Libyan fighters flush them out, The Daily Mail, 6 August 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3727370/Dramatic-moment-ISIS-jihadis-laid-arms-British-special-forces-helped-Libyan-fighters-flush-out.html>

over our regular sniper's roof position.... They initially fired several unusual missiles. These were like small bombs which travelled very far and exploded in the air behind the enemy. We were all watching them that day because they are like celebrities. Everyone knows they are here but they are rarely seen."<sup>23</sup>

Despite the British Secretary of State for Defence, Michael Fallon, telling the House of Commons in May 2016 that Britain was not planning "any kind of combat role" for its forces in Libya<sup>24</sup>, it looks very much as though British Special Forces were involved in the campaign and that their mission was not restricted to an advisory or training role only.

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23 WHO DARES PUNISHES SAS troops smash ISIS with new deadly weapon nicknamed the 'Punisher' in a ferocious street battle in Libya, the Sun, 7 August 2016, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/1569070/sas-troops-hit-isis-fighters-with-their-new-deadly-weapon-nicknamed-the-punisher/>

24 EXCLUSIVE: British soldiers 'fighting IS on frontlines near Libya's Sirte', Middle East Eye, 15 July 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sirte-libya-british-commandos-frontline-uk-britain-michael-fallon-islamic-state-669841059>

## Libyan Attitudes Towards International Intervention

Foreign intervention has long been a hugely controversial topic in Libya, as it is across the rest of the region. In line with other Arab nationalist leaders of their day, Gadhafi railed against imperial domination throughout his four decades in power, associating intervention with colonial plots to divide and rule. As such, there has been a strong antipathy towards external military intervention and violations of national sovereignty in the national narrative.

The taboo surrounding foreign intervention is such that even during the 2011 uprisings, some of those elements who were opposed to Gadhafi rejected the idea of foreign forces taking part in the battle to bring him down. This included some parts of the Islamist camp, who were clear at the outset that they rejected external military intervention in the fight. Sheikh Ali Salabi, a prominent Islamist scholar, who is close to the Muslim Brotherhood, declared, in February 2011, that calling for international intervention was “tantamount to treason.”<sup>25</sup> Certainly, many in the Islamist camp found it difficult to stomach the idea of calling on a non-Muslim force to help bring down a Muslim ruler, albeit one like Gadhafi.

However, some Islamists, including Salabi himself, softened their stance when the tide turned more forcefully against the rebels, and accepted the provision of logistical support from outside, although they remained opposed to foreign forces on the ground. Abdelkarim Al-Hasadi, a military commander in Derna in eastern Libya and former member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), declared during the early stages of the uprisings, “We don’t want the West to come to us. We need weapons and to impose a no-fly zone so military forces will be balanced. If there are foreign forces on Libyan soil we will fight them

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25 Televised interview by Dr Ali Al-Salabi with Al-Jazeera. 17 February 2011. Clip available on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0g7iSucPEs>

before we will fight Gadhafi.”<sup>26</sup> Even Libya’s Grand Mufti, Sheikh Sadiq Al-Gharianni, who has been among the strongest and most outspoken opponents of foreign intervention found a way to justify the NATO campaign, reportedly telling a Libyan television channel on 3 August 2016, “Getting help from non-Muslims when there is fighting among Muslims is not permissible unless there is a necessity”, before going on to explain, “Gadhafi abhorred religion and ridiculed sharia and he used strong force against unarmed people who wanted to lift injustice. So the necessity is clear.”<sup>27</sup>

Yet while there was an uneasy acceptance of the 2011 intervention in the interests of bringing down the former regime, a series of subsequent foreign interventions have prompted shrill reactions inside Libya, particularly from within the Islamist camp. This has especially been the case when such interventions have targeted Islamists. There was uproar, for example, after Libyan militant Abu Anas al-Liby was snatched from outside his Tripoli home in a covert US operation in October 2013. The Dar al-Ifta—Libya’s most senior official religious authority—issued a statement condemning al-Liby’s capture, as did the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, which also demanded that the then-government explain the rumours that it had prior knowledge of the incident.<sup>28</sup> Ansar Al-Sharia, meanwhile, issued a statement accusing the “unjust disbelievers” of having “seized the lands and violated the sanctities, with every legitimate way allowed by the pure Shari`a.”<sup>29</sup>

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26 Al-Hasadi: Al-Imara Al-Islamiya “ukdhuba” Al-Qadhafi Litarwiya Al-Gharb, [Al-Hasadi: The Islamic Emirate is Qaddafi’s «Lie» to Terrorise the West, Al-Watan, 21 March 2011, [www.al-watan.com/viewnews.aspx?d=20110321&cat=report2&pge=3](http://www.al-watan.com/viewnews.aspx?d=20110321&cat=report2&pge=3)

27 Talab Al-TAdakhul Al-Ajnabi Fil Mesan: Jadaliyat Al-Fiqhi Wa Siasi [The Request for Foreign Intervention in the Balance: The Dialectic of Fiqh and Politics], Ean Libya, 10 August 2016 <http://www.eanlibya.com/archives/91062>

28 The Capture of Abu Anas al-Libi: Reactions and Militancy in Libya, CTC Sentinel, November 26, 2013 <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-capture-of-abu-anas-al-libi-reactions-and-militancy-in-libya>

29 Ibid

The arrest of Libyan militant, Ahmed Abu Khattala, who was accused of involvement in the attack on the US mission in Benghazi in September 2013, in a covert US mission in June 2014 provoked similar outrage. Abu Khattala's brother reflected the views of many in this camp when he commented, "What the Americans did was an insult to the honour of all Libyans because now the whole world sees how Libya has become like a hotel for the West where they can come in and out as they wish."<sup>30</sup> Although not everyone felt so strongly about Abu Khattala's capture, with one resident from Benghazi's Al-Laithi neighbourhood commenting, "Those who knew him personally were few and those who care about his abduction are few too"<sup>31</sup>, the government in Tripoli clearly felt compelled to distance itself from the operation. Fearful of a backlash, the government of Prime Minister Ali Zidan, which according to US officials had been aware of the operation, condemned Abu Khattala's capture, describing it as a violation of sovereignty.<sup>32</sup>

Foreign intervention also caused a stir in the summer of 2014, when Operation Libya Dawn took over the capital. In August 2014, the newly inaugurated House of Representatives voted to "contact and coordinate with the United Nations Security Council to study the options in order to protect civilians", especially in Tripoli.<sup>33</sup> The House's decision prompted outrage in Tripoli, including a statement from Libya's ultraorthodox Grand Mufti, Sheikh Sadiq Al-Gharianni, who denounced the House, declaring, "Even under the worst conditions during the first war of liberation, the people of Libya agreed to condemn foreign intervention. They called it treason. Nobody dared to suggest it not even Al-Gadhafi."<sup>34</sup> The House's decision also provoked angry demonstrations in Tripoli and other western

towns, leaving the House no option but to backtrack. It issued a statement on 15 August 2014, clarifying that it had only called on the UN Security Council to intervene "in principle" in order to apply pressure on the warring parties and that it had only asked for assistance with "initiating dialogue between the rival factions."<sup>35</sup>

There was further uproar in July 2016 after it was revealed that French Special Forces were operating in the east of the country. France was forced to confirm the presence of such forces after three of its soldiers were killed when a helicopter was shot down near Benghazi during an intelligence gathering operation.<sup>36</sup> Hundreds of Libyans took to the streets of Tripoli, as well as other western towns including Misrata, Gharyan, Zawia and Sabratha to condemn this intervention, holding up placards that proclaimed, "Get your hands off Libya" and "No French intervention."<sup>37</sup> The demonstrators also turned their anger against the Presidency Council and its failure to respond more robustly to the foreign presence, with calls for the Council and its head, Fayez Serraj, to be brought down.

Similarly, when US forces struck against IS in Sirte in August 2016, protests erupted in Benghazi, Ajdabia and Tobruk, led by Haftar's supporters, who demanded the cancellation of the Libyan political agreement and the expulsion of the UN Special Representative to Libya, Martin Kobler. The Higher Council for Libyan tribes and towns, which accused the Presidency Council of being an expression of political Islam, also condemned the US raids, describing them as "imperialist intervention."<sup>38</sup> The Dar Al-Ifta denounced the US raids, too, condemning them as an attempt to "steal the efforts of the revolutionaries and their precious

30 Capture of Benghazi attack suspect conjures mixed feelings in Libyan city, The Guardian, 20 June 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/20/benghazi-attack-suspect-arrest-abu-khattala>

31 Ibid

32 Ibid

33 Libya Focus, August 2014. Menas Associates. [www.menas.co.uk](http://www.menas.co.uk)

34 Ibid

35 Ibid

36 France confirms three soldiers killed in Libya, Al-Jazeera, 20 July 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/07/france-confirms-soldiers-killed-libya-160720105518216.html>

37 'Hands off Libya': French undercover aid of rogue general sparks protests, RT, 21 July 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/352460-protests-libya-french-involvement/>

38 Libya Focus, August 2016. Menas Associates. [www.menas.co.uk](http://www.menas.co.uk)

sacrifices in Sirte... it is a justification to save Khalifa Haftar.”<sup>39</sup> The Dar Al-Ifta called on the Bunyan Marsous forces to finish off their job in Sirte quickly in order for them to move onto “the real battle against Haftar and the outlaws.”<sup>40</sup>

## The case of the UK’s covert involvement

Britain’s covert military intervention in Sirte, by contrast, elicited a far more muted response inside Libya. The various revelations about British Special Forces supporting and even fighting on the ground against IS - that appeared in the British media and were in some cases repeated in the Libyan media - prompted very little local response. There was no mass condemnation or outpouring of anger against the intervention and no public protest.

This subdued response is related partly to the covert nature of the British mission. Unlike in the case of the French Special Forces, whose presence was confirmed by French President Francois Hollande



Former French President François Hollande confirmed the presence of French Special Forces in Libya in 2016 (image credit: Remi Jouan/Wikimedia)

39 “Al-Ifta Al-Libiya” Tarfud Al-Istiana Bi Amirika dhid Tanzim Al-Dawla, Libyan Dar Al-Ifta Rejects Getting Help against IS, Al-Jazeera Net, 3 August 2016, <http://bit.ly/2uCcWT7>

40 Ibid

following the deaths of the three soldiers,<sup>41</sup> and unlike the announced and very evident US air strikes, information about British involvement in Sirte emerged in dribs and drabs in the UK media, leaving the exact nature of the UK’s role in the campaign unclear. The subdued response was also related to a strong sense inside Libya that the country had fragmented and did not have the capacity to deal with a group like IS on its own.

However, the lack of response to British action was also connected heavily to the fact that for many Libyans, IS was never the most pressing priority. As many viewed it, the country was engulfed in a far bigger and more important conflict that had left Libyans grappling with much more immediate problems, including the lack of security in their own areas, as well as the absence of a functioning state, not to mention a tanking economy that was making everyday living increasingly challenging. For many Libyans, therefore, the fight against IS was a sideshow to the real issues facing the country. As former MP in the Justice and Construction Party (JCP), and former member of the National Transitional Council (NTC), the interim ruling body that was formed during the revolution and that ruled Libya until 2012, Abdulrazzak Al-Arabi, described in an interview for this project, IS was like a “summer cloud” for Libya.

It is notable, too, that there was an equally limited response to the British intervention in Sirte by the militant Islamist camp. There was no sudden surge of support for IS in response to the operation and no move by any of the militant Islamist forces on the ground to make alliances with it. This is not surprising given that IS was always a limited phenomenon in Libya. The group never had any real local support and despite controlling Sirte for more than a year, struggled to expand beyond a very limited area.

This is because there were certain social and structural factors in Libya that worked to inhibit its expansion, such as the strength

41 Three French special forces soldiers die in Libya, The Guardian, 20 July 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/20/three-french-special-forces-soldiers-die-in-libya-helicopter-crash>

and influence of the tribes, as well as the fact that the Islamist scene was already heavily overcrowded. Furthermore, while IS in Iraq and Syria was able to feed heavily on sectarian grievances to expand its popular base, the group in Libya had no such ammunition. Furthermore, in the absence of any proper centralised authority, each town in Libya, already separated by Libya's uncompromising geography, had come to act increasingly like a mini state, something which helped to contain IS further.

Covert military action by the UK, as well as the more overt air strikes carried out by the US, were never going to be sufficient, therefore, to convince Libyans to rush to IS's defence. Moreover, IS was always viewed by Libyans, including militant groups, as an external phenomenon that had been imported from outside, limiting its appeal further. It is notable that several militant factions, including the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council and the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council, issued public statements distancing themselves from IS and its leader in Iraq, Abu Baker al-Baghdadi.

Yet while fears about blowback may not have been realised, Britain's participation in the Sirte campaign had serious repercussions for Libya nonetheless, including for its longer-term peace and stability. Indeed, through its intervention in the fight against IS, the UK, along with other international powers, got itself intertwined in the complex local political struggles which are standing in the way of real peace and security.

### **Implications of the focus on IS**

Given the intricacies of the Libyan crisis, it is little surprise that there were a broad range of responses to questions about British covert action in Sirte. At one end of the spectrum, several respondents expressed clear support for the operation against IS. Some of the rationale for this support was related to their viewing IS as a universal problem that had to be dealt with collaboratively. Prominent Libyan writer Ahmed Fagih, for example, stated, "The GNA was definitely right in eliciting help from any part of the world to fight such evil of a

universal nature.... IS is not only a threat on a local level that can only be fought with local means. It is an international mafia that needs to be fought and attacked from every corner of the world." Similarly, an employee in the Ministry of Telecommunications commented, "Help is always appreciated as ISIS is a common enemy." Likewise, Fawzi Bu Katef, the former Commander of the Martyrs of the 17 February Brigade in Benghazi, who is currently Libya's ambassador to Uganda, acknowledged that Libya needed the help of the international community and that fighting against IS was a "moral obligation".

Others were opposed to the principle of intervention but believed that in the circumstances, Libya had no choice but to call on others for assistance. There was a strong, almost resigned sense among several respondents that Libya could not deal with IS alone. Former Justice Minister, Salah Marghani, for example, stated, "Most Libyans agree on the need to eliminate terrorist groups. Libyans cannot do it alone in spite of the fact that IS has no Libyan incubator as such." Likewise, journalist Jalal Othman declared, "Foreign intervention has a set of consequences. I oppose it whether secret or public. But the current circumstances push us to accept the least of the damage. Fighting terrorism and chaos is a supreme goal that will allow us to accept anything." A political science graduate from Tripoli commented, "Libya has the right to ask for British help against IS or other forces. Libya collapsed militarily and politically and it doesn't have the power to control its territory." Prominent Tripoli based journalist, Hisham Shalawi, commented, "We are a divided country politically and military [sic]. We are a very weak state. I don't think we have the ability to take decisions to be honest, especially in cases like fighting IS." Mohamed El-Ganga, a human rights activist stated that Libya was right to ask for assistance to defeat IS because the GNA "doesn't have the skills and is not qualified to be a strong government against IS." Meanwhile, Libyan journalist and writer Khaeri Abu Shagur believed, "It is necessary to get rid of ISIS in Libya. Libyans could not do it on their own. In order to achieve this objective, all actions are legitimate."

At the other end of the spectrum, several respondents were clear in their opposition to British military intervention. One Libyan student commented, "In my opinion this covert British military intervention is a violation of the sovereignty of the state regardless of whether IS exists or not. If British military alleges to fight terrorism in Libya it should be held liable for violations because it should respect the sovereignty of the state." Oil and energy consultant, Bourima Belgassem, stated, "I am against any kind of foreign intervention in Libya, including covert British military actions against ISIS. I believe that ISIS doesn't have a community incubator and suffers isolation.... Historically foreign interventions in the Arab region, had no positive impact."

Similarly, one respondent who is close to the leadership of the Defend Benghazi Brigades, a mix of hardline revolutionary and Islamist elements that looks to Libya's Grand Mufti for spiritual guidance, was explicit in his rejection of the British operation. He explained, "I believe the war against IS is incomprehensible and it's an excuse to occupy Muslim countries..... I am sure the Libyan people are able to achieve victory over IS. We Arabs generally speaking don't like foreign forces on our territories. I am objecting because Libyans are able to gain victory over them [IS]." Such comments reflect the view of many in the more hard-line Islamist camp, who do not support IS, but who reject the Presidency Council as well as Western foreign intervention.

Somewhat ironically, others who shared this rejection of British intervention in Sirte came from those most opposed to the Islamist camp. Indeed, the respondents whose views were most in line with those of the House of Representatives and the pro-Haftar camp were clear in their opposition to British action in Libya. One civil society activist commented, "I am against intervention because there is a Libyan army that is fighting terrorism in Libya. Britain should have given support to the Libyan army because Libya is sovereign and the state should respect that." In other words, British intervention was rejected because it bolstered and was sanctioned by those considered to have no proper legitimacy.

### Political divisions in local attitudes

Many of the responses to the British intervention in Sirte reflected wider divisions around issues of legitimacy. Legitimacy has been a strong component of the Libyan crisis almost from the start, with much of the conflict narrative focusing around who is and who isn't Libya's legitimate ruling power. As a result, the various forces on the ground have made repeated appeals to legitimacy, whether it be revolutionary, ideological or electoral, as a means of justifying their attempts to hold onto power or to crush their opponents. This has left Libyan society bitterly divided.

Thus, while respondents were drawn from a cross section of Libyans, the responses inevitably reflected some of these divisions. This meant that those who supported the Presidency Council were often more supportive of British intervention, while those who rejected it and the political agreement that spawned it, were broadly more hostile to the covert British presence.

It is clear, therefore, that views on Britain's intervention against IS cannot be separated from the wider conflict that has gripped the country. This is unsurprising given that responses to intervention more broadly since the 2011 revolution have been driven as much by local political dynamics as by the act of intervention itself. The Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, for example, which has supported the Presidency Council, accepted British covert action in Sirte, but opposed French covert action in Benghazi. The head of the Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party, Mohamed Sawan, told the media, "To talk about foreign forces staging a war against IS is exaggerated. Certainly, there is a limited group that gives some logistical support in the fight against terrorism."<sup>42</sup> By contrast, the Brotherhood referred to the intervention by French Special Forces as "A declaration of war against the Libyan state."<sup>43</sup> The Guide of the

42 Fi Hiwar Khas Ma Rais Hizb Al-Adala wa Al-Bina Al-Libyee, Special Dialogue with the Head of the Libyan Justice and Construction Party, Arabi21, 13 July 2016, <http://bit.ly/2w3VpBo>

43 Muzaharat Bimudn Libeeya A'htijajan Ala "Alghazu Al-Faransi", Demonstrations in Libyan Cities in Protest against the "French Invasion", Al-Jazeera Net, 21/07/2016, <http://bit.ly/2tNUCrr>

Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, Ahmed Abdallah Al-Souki, meanwhile, condemned French intervention in Benghazi, while justifying the US intervention against IS in Sirte, stating, "Intervention has clearly been requested by the Libyan state and was confined to implementing air strikes. This is different to the French intervention in the east of the country which was not sanctioned and where foreign forces were allowed to be on Libyan territory, something we reject and condemn strongly."<sup>44</sup>

It is little coincidence, too, that the protests that erupted in Tripoli against the French intervention in Benghazi in July 2016 were driven by anti-Haftar components who appeared to be more angry at the fact that Paris was assisting their opponent than anything else. Notably, the protests against the French erupted in the west of the country as opposed to the east, which is where these forces were actually operating.

Conversely, when the US struck against IS in Sirte, the protests were driven by Haftar's supporters, who were objecting more to the fact that the US was backing forces sanctioned by the Presidency Council than to intervention itself. Despite Haftar's Operation Dignity campaign being launched under the banner of fighting terrorism, the pro-Haftar camp balked at foreign intervention against IS because this intervention gave succour to the Presidency Council. Haftar's spokesman, Ahmed Al-Mismari, told the media in August 2016 that US airstrikes on IS positions in Sirte would only "fall into the category of US elections propaganda" and "propaganda for the UN-proposed government."<sup>45</sup> Al-Mismari also accused Serraj of using the US as "the power on which he will establish his government in Libya and he is ready to put Libya under the trusteeship of foreigners in

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44 Mesoul Jama'at Al-Ikhwan Al-Libeeya: La Nesa'a Lil Hokum Wala Nukhattat Li Dalika (The Head of the Libyan Brotherhood Group: We Don't Seek to Rule and We Haven't Planned to do so). Araby 21, 1 September 2016, <http://bit.ly/2u2Mfnh>

45 Spokesman of Haftar's forces says US airstrikes on Sirte elections' propaganda, The Libya Observer, 4 August 2016, <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/spokesman-haftar%E2%80%99s-forces-says-us-airstrikes-sirte-elections%E2%80%99-propaganda>

exchange for ruling Libya", adding, "Not the US and not any other party can free Sirte from IS, only our forces can."<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Tariq Al-Juroushi, a member of the House of Representatives' defence committee and the son of the head of Haftar's air force (Suqour Al-Jaroushi), criticised the Presidency Council for requesting foreign assistance, stating, "Serraj asked for air intervention without going back to Aqeela Saleh [the head of the House of Representatives] or the General Commander of the army, Khalifa Haftar, and without taking their views into account. This is a dangerous precedent and a violation of the people's rights."<sup>47</sup>

Rather than there being a blanket rejection of foreign intervention, therefore, Libyan factions across the political spectrum have adopted more of a pick and choose approach to when intervention is acceptable according to their own particular needs. They have also instrumentalised such intervention as a means of discrediting and undermining their political opponents, accusing each other of having sold out on national sovereignty for their own gain. Despite the ongoing rhetoric against foreign intervention, therefore, foreign intervention - including that in Sirte - became intrinsically bound up in the competition to dominate Libya and in the local struggle for legitimacy. As one respondent concluded, "The problem for us is that members of the political class are competing for power. They empower themselves against each other through foreign parties."

### Appearing Partisan

The other issue to emerge strongly out of the responses was that Britain's military intervention was perceived by many as partisan. This is indicative of the fact that while the GNA was conceived to be a consensus or national unity government, it was never anything of the sort. As explained above, the GNA was created out of a political agreement that was signed

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46 *Ibid*

47 Daribat Al-Amrikia Tuthir Al-Makhowf min Taemiy Al-Azma Al-Siasiya fi Libia, [US Strikes Raise Fears of a Deepening Political Crisis in Libya], Alarab, 3 August 2016, <http://www.alarab.co.uk/?id=86641>

by representatives of two institutions that did not support the deal. More importantly, while some powerful forces on the ground including a number of militias from Misrata and Tripoli were happy to accept the political agreement and the institutions it gave birth to, many other big powerbrokers, including Haftar and the powerful eastern tribes that support him, refused it. Thus, there were many factions and forces who were excluded from this new body even before it had begun.

In addition, almost as soon as it was established, the Presidency Council was plagued with divisions and boycotts. At the start of 2016, deputy head of the council, Ali Qatrani, who is from the east and who was considered by some to be 'Haftar's man' in the Council, suspended his membership of the new body because the political agreement had not realised the aspirations of eastern Libya. Qatrani also accused the Council of being "controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood", which he accused of having nominated all the names on the proposed list of candidates for the Government of National Unity.<sup>48</sup> Qatrani was joined in his boycott by State Minister for Presidency Council Affairs and Legislation, Omar Aswad, from Zintan (which is allied to Haftar), who suspended his membership of the Presidency Council because it had not been approved by the House of Representatives.

By the time that the operation against IS began, therefore, the Presidency Council already looked to be dominated by the Tripoli and Misratan camps, and to be representing the west of Libya rather than the east.

It is little surprise, then, that Britain's support for the Presidency Council in the battle for Sirte gave the impression that it was siding with and empowering certain powers in the west of Libya against the main powerbrokers in the east. As Essa Abdalkaoum, a journalist from Benghazi commented, "Covert military intervention by the British supports and benefits the militias in the west of Libya." An individual who is close to the Defend Benghazi Brigades stated that Libyan suffering would only end when the international community "stood at an equal distance from all." A civil society

activist commented, "Without doubt, British intervention favours one side over the other." Former Justice Minister, Salah Al-Marghani commented, "IS is the enemy of all but supporting Libya Dawn or indeed the GNA is looked upon as favouritism against the east."

### **An Empowered Misrata**

There was particular concern expressed by respondents about how the Sirte operation would further strengthen Misrata at the expense of other forces. Kept purposefully weak by Gadhafi for decades, Misrata emerged after the revolution as a powerful force that could impose its authority in certain areas, which included parts of the capital where it took control of some neighbourhoods. Misrata was further strengthened after it formed the backbone of Operation Libya Dawn, with its powerful brigades leading the operation to take control of Tripoli and beyond.

However, Misrata came under intense criticism from its opponents who dismissed it as representing little more than a group of militias who were opposed to the elected House of Representatives. Misrata's willingness to make common cause with many of the Islamist brigades in the west of Libya also led to its being conflated in the media and elsewhere with Islamist forces, even though Misrata comprised forces that represented different ideological orientations ranging from Islamist to more liberal strands. Thus, while Misrata was powerful, it felt distinctly uncomfortable about the light in which it was being cast.

The establishment of the Presidency Council, therefore, offered Misrata an opportunity and, as explained earlier, it quickly threw its weight behind the new government as a means of presenting its forces as the official and legitimate security apparatus of the state. This not only afforded Misrata a more 'respectable' status, it also served to undermine Haftar who had always sought to present his own forces as the only legitimate army in Libya. Misrata's willingness to lead the fight against IS on

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48 Libya Focus. February 2016. Menas Associates. [www.menas.co.uk](http://www.menas.co.uk)

behalf of both the Presidency Council and the international community further undercut Haftar, who had sought to lead the battle against IS in Sirte himself.

The international community's bolstering of Misrata in this way certainly rang alarm bells for some respondents. Former Justice Minister, Saleh Marghani, warned, "Misrata's political size may need to be checked in order to control any negative influence from its feeling too influential that might impede the compromises needed for a political settlement." Journalist Jalal Othman meanwhile stated, "Those who were fighting on the ground made benefit of finishing off IS to empower themselves against the state and outside of its authority." A civil servant in the economy ministry commented, "It is perceived that the UK is siding with Misrata's militias." It is clear, therefore, that by seeming to side with one faction in the conflict, the UK created the impression that it was partisan.

### **Marginalising the East**

In this vein, some respondents went further and echoed the kinds of accusations levelled against the UK by the pro-Haftar camp to the effect that the British government has pursued a deliberate policy of bolstering Libya's Islamist camp. Indeed, the Sirte intervention strengthened existing perceptions that Britain wants Islamists to either be in power or to be part of any power sharing formula. This is a long-held accusation dating back to the formation of the NTC in March 2011. When this transitional council was first announced, it was comprised almost exclusively of individuals of a more liberal orientation. Because Gadhafi was still in control of the west of Libya at this point, it was also a body comprising members who were almost exclusively from the east.

As such, the NTC was deemed by many, including some Western powers, to not be representative. As one former senior Brotherhood member, Alamin Belhaj, explained, Western nations "wanted to



Young girl in Misrata (image: Jordl Bernabeau Farris/Flickr)

trust the NTC and in order to recognise it they wanted a representative body for Libya. There were no Islamists in the NTC and therefore it did not represent Libya.”<sup>49</sup> Prominent Libyan liberal Mahmoud Jibril meanwhile argued, “The West got the idea that the presence of a moderate Islamic power in North Africa is the main guarantee and the most active weapons to confront extremism.... That formula is very attractive and it helps shift the suspicion that the West is hostile to Islam.”<sup>50</sup> In May, therefore, the NTC was widened to include two members of the Muslim Brotherhood who also represented the west of the country.

The idea that Britain backs the Brotherhood clearly stuck. Jibril went on to comment, “The Americans are standing with the federalists. Clearly the English have embraced the Muslim Brotherhood... They are the ones who helped them to return.”<sup>51</sup> In August 2015, the British Ambassador to Libya, Peter Millett, observed that there was a common conspiracy in Libya which holds that Britain supports the Muslim Brotherhood, a theory he denied explaining, “We don’t back any group or individual.”<sup>52</sup> However, Britain’s continued willingness to deal with the Islamist current during the UN led peace process and its acceptance of certain individuals being included in the Presidency Council, fuelled existing suspicions among certain components of Libyan society that Britain’s policy was aimed at strengthening the hand of Islamist factions.

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49 Interview by author with Belhaj, Manchester, 2014

50 Halka Nikashia: Libya... Ala Ain? (Discussion Forum: Libya... Where is it Heading?) Mustakbal Alarabi Magazine, Issue 399, May 2012, Available at [http://www.caus.org.lb/PDF/EmagazineArticles/mustaqbal\\_399\\_halak%20nikachieh%2094-125.pdf](http://www.caus.org.lb/PDF/EmagazineArticles/mustaqbal_399_halak%20nikachieh%2094-125.pdf)

51 Bawabat Alwasat Tuhawar Mahmoud Jibril: Libiya Muhadada Beltadakhul Al-Askari Al-Khariji aw Al-Taqsim (1-3), [Alwasat Interviews Mahmoud Jibril: Libya is Threatened with External Military Intervention or Partition (1-3)], Alwasat, 10 January 2015, <http://alwasat.ly/ar/news/discussion/55782/>

52 Mythbusters, Peter Millett, Foreign and Commonwealth Office Blog, 27 August 2015, <https://blogs.fco.gov.uk/petermillett/2015/08/27/mythbusters/>

Britain’s role in the Sirte operation, therefore, was viewed by some as further evidence that the UK was deliberately marginalising the east in order to strengthen Islamists and Islamist militias in the west. Former Health Minister in the NTC’s Executive Board, Naji Barakat, commented, “I am opposing any British military intervention in Libya because they are not talking, dealing or working with the right people. They are insisting that the Islamic Brotherhood is part of any table with four legs.” Writer Ahmed Fagih accused the West of pursuing a policy of “overt and covert support for the Islamic trend against democratic forces.” Writer Nureddin Tulti commented, “Western powers are seen to be unambiguously in support of ‘moderate’ Islamic factions, including the Brotherhood, and others allied to them in the west of the country.” Likewise, one Tripoli journalist commented, “British military intervention in Libya was always linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and the jihadist groups... The British military intervention in Libya in the last fight against ISIS was just an act because there has been a fight against ISIS since 2014 in Benghazi and Derna, but where was the British military intervention there? Why didn’t they help in fighting the terrorists there in places bigger and more complicated than the fight in Sirte?”

Some of these comments mirror the bitterness felt by many who tend towards the House of Representatives camp and who resent the fact that, as they see it, their forces have been making sacrifices in the fight against terrorism in Benghazi yet were sidelined by the international community in the fight against IS. Shortly after the US airstrikes against IS in Sirte began, a committee in the House of Representatives summoned the American ambassador to complain that the strikes were “a political move and not about fighting terrorism” and to bemoan the fact that there was no similar intervention to assist the House in its war against terrorism in Benghazi and Derna.<sup>53</sup>

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53 Majlis Al-Nuwab Yastadi Al-Safir Al-Amriki ala Khalfiya Qasf Sirte, [The House of Representatives Summons the US Ambassador Because of the Bombing of Sirte], Ean Libya, 3 August 2016, <http://www.eanlibya.com/archives/90286>



Sirte after the Libyan civil war (Image credit: European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operation and Danish Demining Group/Flickr)

This anger was heightened by the fact that many in this camp accuse Misrata of supporting and supplying the very groups in Benghazi that Haftar has been fighting against. Bourima Belgassim opposed the fact that the British intervention in Sirte supported “the side who is supporting the terrorists” adding, “everyone knows about the fishing boats smuggling weapons and fighters from many countries [out of ports in the west of Libya] to fight against the Libyan army in the eastern region of Libya. This means they are fighting terrorists here [Sirte] and supporting them there [Benghazi] just to be able to say ‘we are the only patriots in Libya’. The British know they are liars and they help them.” Similarly, one journalist commented, “If the British military intervention was really about fighting the terrorists anywhere in Libya, we would welcome that. But when you are supporting someone who is arming the terrorists in another city less than 10 km from your location or base, don’t tell me that

would happen without your knowledge as if you were an army from a poor country like Angola.”

It is clear, therefore, that Britain’s covert action in Sirte has reinforced the perception that Britain is not impartial and that it not only supports certain forces and towns in the west of Libya, but also Islamist groups and factions.<sup>54</sup>

54 This is particularly interesting given that there have been a few reports suggesting that British Special Forces have also been providing assistance to Haftar in the east of the country (see UK troops ‘operating from French-led Libyan base aiding renegade general’, Middle East Eye, 23 June 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/french-led-secret-operations-room-backing-renegade-general-libya-81826394>). And on 21 July 2016, the head of Haftar’s air force, Suqour Juroushi acknowledged that there were some British forces who were experts and trainers present in Benina, telling the media, “The French number no more than ten, the British six or seven, plus five from the US.” (Al-Juroushi: Al-Fransioun Al-Thalatha Jisr Min Quwat Hassa Ajnabia fi

## Issues of Legality

One thing that stood out particularly strongly from the responses was that many respondents, including some of those who welcomed foreign military assistance in the fight against IS, had serious concerns about the legality of international military action in Libya. These concerns were based on the fact that in the eyes of many Libyans, including some who are not hostile to the Presidency Council, the Council itself is not yet a legal entity because it has not been approved officially by the House of Representatives.

When asked whether the Presidency Council/GNA had the proper authority to sanction international military intervention, many respondents flagged up this lack of official approval. One civil society activist commented, “The GNA has no right to allow intervention because the GNA is the result of a political agreement that wasn’t given trust by the main legislature of Libya.” Oil and energy consultant, Bourima Belgassem, stated, “The GNA does not yet have the final approval from the House that is necessary for it to be able to exercise the assigned responsibilities of a legitimate body. Accordingly, the GNA needs full legitimacy to exercise any small or big responsibilities, such as allowing covert British military operation in Libya against IS.” Jalal Gallal, a former member of the (NTC), , “The GNA had no authority [to sanction covert military action] as the Skhirat accord and the GNA were not endorsed by the House.”

Likewise, Benghazi based journalist, Essa Abdalkaoum, stated, “The GNA did not have the authority to allow covert British military operations in Libya before consulting with the Libyan parliament, which should vote on the Skhirat political agreement. This decision would require 134 votes. This step has not been achieved.” The late Saad Shelmani, former foreign ministry spokesman, stated that he believed the GNA’s sanctioning of

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Libya [Al-Juroushi: The Three French Men were Members of Foreign Special Forces in Libya], Ewan Libya, 21 July 2016, <http://ewanlibya.ly/news/news.aspx?id=42884>). However, these reports are not confirmed, and respondents were not aware of any reports indicating that the British were involved in supporting Haftar in the east.

British military operations were “against Libyan sovereignty” adding, “plus the GNA is just for one year to stabilise Libya and to bring Libyan factions to an agreement.”

Some respondents also expressed concern that the decision to sanction external military support was not even taken by consensus within the Presidency Council, given that it has always been a divided body. There was concern, therefore, that the decision to sanction foreign intervention appeared to have been taken largely by Serraj rather than by the council as a whole.

These concerns regarding the Presidency Council reflect wider anxieties in Libya related to the fact that in the absence of any legitimate centralised authority, the international community more or less forced through the formation of a government that could serve as a vehicle to sanction their participation in the fight against IS. For many Libyans, therefore, the GNA was imposed from abroad to serve a foreign agenda rather than to resolve the conflict that was destroying Libya. Libyan writer, Nurreddin Tulti, described, “The GNA is generally viewed as a creation by the so-called international community, which has also expended enormous effort trying to impose it on Libyans.”

Similar views were even expressed by Faye Serraj who complained to the media in November 2016 that the international community’s priorities were fighting terrorism and illegal migration, elaborating, “Every time we sit together with representatives of the international community this seems to be the main topic on the table asking what we have done in these two issues. I keep telling them that there are other issues that concern Libyan citizens more than these. The Libyan citizen sees how the international community is concentrating on its priorities and not concerned that the Libyan citizen queues for three days to get LD 100 from the bank. And how you are not concerned that the electricity is cut for up to 14 hours...”<sup>55</sup>

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55 Serraj blames Haftar, Saleh, Elkaber and Ghariani for Libya’s problems. Libya Herald. 2 November 2016. <https://www.libyaherald.com/2016/11/02/serraj-blames-haftar-salah-elkaber-and-ghariani-for-libyas-problems/>

It is little wonder, then, that as the Presidency Council has failed to deal with the issues facing Libyans, it has come increasingly to be referred to in Libya as a 'protectorate government.' One former minister commented, "The GNA enjoys neither legal power nor any real power on the ground. I think the unpopularity and mistakes committed by the Presidency Council made it a hopeless case. I do not think Serraj or any of his deputies are really the right men to change that. The more the West supports him... the more he is disliked."

Of course, not all respondents agreed with this assessment, with those who are most supportive of the Presidency Council stating clearly that its decision to fight against IS was legal. This included former Justice and Construction Party MP, Abdulrazak Al-Arabi who commented, "The security measures [in the political agreement] don't limit the GNA's powers as far as fighting terrorism

is concerned. Therefore, what it did was a constitutional act." However, there was a clear sense of concern among many respondents that British military action in Sirte had been sanctioned by a government that not only had no proper legitimate status, but which in the eyes of many Libyans never had the interests of Libya at its heart.

### **Suspicion about Britain's Motives**

The responses also threw up a series of questions about Britain's true intentions in Libya, something that was fuelled by the covert nature of the operation. Former Health Minister, Naji Barakat, commented, "The covert British operations were wrong as no one knows the British government's policy and the British government doesn't share its policy with the Libyans. So everyone worries about a hidden agenda." This ties into a wider feeling in the country that Libya is full



Former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry with former British Foreign Secretary William Hague and former Libyan Prime Minister Ali Zeidan following a trilateral meeting in London, United Kingdom, on November 24, 2013. (image: US State Department)

of operatives, agents and military personnel from all sorts of countries and that no one knows exactly who is there and what they are doing.

The responses certainly reflected a strong suspicion about British motives, with several respondents not believing that the Sirte operation was solely about stopping IS. There were several accusations among the responses that Britain was involved in the battle in Sirte for its own interests and that its real goals were more to do with stealing Libya's wealth and resources. One student explained, "The international community has bad faith towards Libya because it does not seek to protect civilians from ISIS. It seeks to dominate resources in Sirte." Journalist Jalal Othman commented, "If Western countries look at Libya as booty, this will damage not only Libya's interests but those of the whole of the Mediterranean and the consequences will affect everyone."

Meanwhile, a civil society activist commented, "Everyone knows that the international community didn't intervene for good reasons. They are trying to prolong the conflict in order to benefit from it." Writer Nureddin Tulti, commented, "A foreign force operating overtly or covertly in a country such as Libya that is fragmented and lacks strong and well-established state institutions, would most probably be pursuing additional interests and objectives of its own that many run counter to the interests of the host country. I strongly oppose it." Oil and energy consultant, Bourima Belgassem asserted, "The UK is driven by its own interests and usually in such situations there is no space for values and human charity. The UK is looking for a.... partner that can be exploited to achieve a common interest."

As such, the opaque nature of Britain's intervention opened it up to further questions about the true impetus for its actions.

## What next for international engagement in Libya?

The unclear motivations for British intervention in the Sirte campaign have fuelled concerns about the longer-term impact of foreign intervention in Libya. While many respondents agreed that eliminating IS was a positive development, there was still significant concern about what would happen next both in Sirte and in Libya more widely. As the aforementioned jurist Salah Al-Marghani stated, “What comes after Sirte worries me!” Civil society activist, Dr Ibtissam Al-Gosby, commented, “The intervention contributes to prolonging chaos and division and conflict and it will continue if the major states don’t act in a credible and transparent way to achieve peace and bring Libyans together.” Writer Nureddine Tulti feared that the intervention “may well lead or contribute to partitioning or worse, total chaos.”

Yet what emerged even more strongly was a real concern about what would happen were Libya to be left alone again now that the Sirte operation has finished. Gumah Gamaty, the head of the Tageer party, who also formed part of the Dialogue Committee for the UN backed peace process commented, “A question that remains following the liberation of Sirte is whether Western countries will continue to pursue a positive engagement policy in Libya. Or alternatively, will they shift to one of mere containment, where Libyans are left to sort out their problems by themselves, as long as the threat of terrorism and illegal immigration from Libya is well contained and under control?”<sup>56</sup> In a similar fashion, Abdulrazzak Al-Aradi, former MP for the JCP commented, “If international efforts are not invested in building up an army and security services that are capable of following IS, this group will be capable of rebuilding itself and the efforts of these countries will be lost as happened after the 2011 revolution.”

56 IS defeated in Sirte: What lies ahead for Libya?, Guma El-Gamaty, The New Arab, 15 December 2015, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2016/12/15/is-defeated-in-sirte-what-lies-ahead-for-libya>

Al-Aradi’s comments reflect the feeling held by many in Libya that their country was abandoned by Western nations after the 2011 intervention. Despite the dominant narrative that rejects foreign intervention, there is clearly much bitterness about the way in which Libya was left to its own devices once Gadhafi had been toppled. As one Libyan who is close to the Defend Benghazi Brigades commented, the international community “left the country in chaos and civil war.” Journalist Jalal Othman rued, “After getting rid of Gadhafi, the international community left Libya facing its fate alone. Quite often the tanks were moving from one town to go to bomb another. The international community heard that, saw that, but it didn’t do anything to stop it.” Former NTC member, Jalal Gallal from Benghazi commented, “The international community’s behaviour at the outset of the revolution was admirable. The problem resulted from the lack of vision or any clear plan and assistance after Gadhafi’s demise.”

Former Foreign Ministry spokesman, the late Saad Shelmani, commented, “Libyans think that Western nations abandoned Libya and didn’t give it any real support after Gadhafi was defeated. Instead of supporting Libya they are looking to take the money that is frozen in their banks.” Rami Ali, an engineer in the telecommunications ministry accused the international community of being “indifferent to Libya”, while one Tripoli businessman complained that the international community has been “very bad and slow to take action.” Human rights activist, Mohamed El-Ganga explained how he had welcomed the 2011 intervention but felt let down afterwards because the international community, “left Libya alone. We don’t have organisations, we don’t have an army. They left Libya under the control of militias.”

Similarly, one respondent, who wished to remain anonymous, responded to a question about how the international community has behaved towards Libya since 2011 by stating, “Unfortunately it’s been a big let-down. The international community was standing still looking at those militias fighting in Tripoli and burning our only proper gate to the world, Tripoli International Airport back



Former US Secretary of State John Kerry sits with Libyan Prime Minister Fayez in Vienna, Austria, on May 16, 2016 (image credit:US Department of State)

in 2014. Since then our situation has been deteriorating rapidly to the point where can barely afford food and water now.” Writer and activist, Khaeri Abushagur, commented, “There was a lack of detailed knowledge of Libyan society and the long-term plan was inconsistent and confused. A large amount of money and resources have been spent in Libya but did not necessarily end up being spent or used wisely.”

Likewise, Fawzi Bu Katef complained that the international community had failed to understand that Libya’s new leaders had inherited a failed state and that infrastructure needed to be built from scratch, accusing it of having done a good job initially but of stopping before it completed the job. Along similar lines, journalist Essa Abdalkaoum commented that the international community’s behaviour towards Libya “has not been stable” and that it was lacking a lot of local knowledge. Oil and energy consultant, Bourima Belgassem, meanwhile, accused the international community of “having a low level of enthusiasm” and being shy to talk about human rights, while talking loudly about illegal migration.

Within this vein, another issue to emerge strongly from the responses was a sense that by turning its back on Libya, the international community had left the country to the mercy of regional players. It was notable that in the responses, far more anger was directed against regional actors who were meddling in Libya than against anything Britain or other Western players had done. Many flagged up the roles played by Egypt, the UAE, Jordan, Qatar and Turkey, who have all played their part in Libya’s conflict, backing different factions to the detriment of peace and stability. Indeed, Qatar and Turkey have backed the Tripoli and Misratan camps, while Egypt and the UAE have stood firmly behind Haftar, providing him with political support, as well as military training and assistance.<sup>57</sup>

As such there was further resentment that the international community had created a situation whereby such unrestrained intervention could go unchecked.

57 Is Libya a proxy war?, Fred Wehrey, The Washington Post, 24 October 2014. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/10/24/is-libya-a-proxy-war/?utm\\_term=.fa67d0ab4f52](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/10/24/is-libya-a-proxy-war/?utm_term=.fa67d0ab4f52)

While many of these comments reflect a somewhat contradictory position in which the international community is damned if it intervenes and damned if it stands back, there is clearly a strong feeling of resentment inside Libya that the country has been subjected to a barrage of meddling and ill-thought through interventions, none of which have had Libya's interests at its core.

## Conclusions

While the British military intervention in Sirte undoubtedly succeeded in terms of short term tactical gain, and while the limited and covert nature of the operation was far less controversial than any ground troop operation would have been, this intervention has come at a price. Not only has it fuelled existing perceptions about the UK and its intentions towards Libya, it has aggravated local tensions by becoming bound up in

Libya's internal conflicts. Moreover, one of the biggest disasters for Libya was the hurried imposition of the GNA as a vehicle to sanction military support for the war against IS without there being any real plan for meaningful peace.

As analyst Mattia Toledo commented in March 2016, "... there is now hard evidence of UK involvement on the ground in Libya. It is worth asking how the UK government thinks these operations interact with efforts to strike a unity deal."<sup>58</sup> More than one year down the line and such questions remain unanswered. In the meantime, the GNA has added yet another layer of complexity onto an already complex crisis and has served to sow further divisions not only between the eastern and western camps, but within both of these camps themselves. And while Libya, with the help of foreign assistance, may have triumphed over IS in Sirte, the country has continued to descend ever further into chaos with ordinary Libyans paying the price.

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58 REVEALED: Britain and Jordan's secret war in Libya, Middle East Eye, 25 March 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/revealed-britain-and-jordan-s-secret-war-libya-147374304>

Remote Control Project  
Oxford Research Group  
Development House  
56-64 Leonard Street  
London EC2A 4LT  
United Kingdom

+44 (0)207 549 0298  
[info@remotecontrolproject.org](mailto:info@remotecontrolproject.org)

[www.remotecontrolproject.org](http://www.remotecontrolproject.org)