

CrisesAlert 2: European security interests at stake in Libya?

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Clingendael Report



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Clingendael CrisesAlerts Libya

Unpacking conflict trends, theaters and assumptions forms the basis of the Clingendael CrisesAlerts on Libya: where are the theaters of war, what are trends in fault lines, success and conflict activity?

European security interests at stake: this CrisesAlert explores why Europe should care about the ongoing conflict. What security interests are at stake? What are the mechanisms whereby the crises impact Europe and its member states? What should be done?

Local conflict, local peace: this CrisesAlert explores variations in local power: who is cooperating with whom? What explains the coalitions of violence and coalitions of peace? What can be done?

The EU in the world: this CrisesAlert probes into the regional and geopolitical power dynamics. How do fault lines develop and what does this suggest for the EU's room for maneuver, foreign policy and actionable policy?

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CrisesAlert 2: European security interests at stake in Libya?

Why should Europe care about the Libyan conflict? Apart from the obvious humanitarian concerns, the answer for many is that European security interests are at stake. Some point to WMD threats, as not all chemical weapons have been removed from the country. Others point to the potentially destabilizing effect of Libya on its neighbours and the wider North Africa region. Yet the three most important threats from Libya are believed to stem from terrorism, geopolitical competition and migration. According to the EU's high representative Federica Mogherini, the "top priority" is "to manage the migratory flows together with the Libyan authorities".¹

The primary disagreement is between the eastern Libyan National Army (LNA) headed by General Khalifa Haftar and the western Government of National Accord led by Fayez al-Sarraj. Since the beginning of 2017, negotiations have been ongoing to solve this political conflict with a number of European, neighbouring and regional countries pursuing a diplomatic solution. One of the primary assumptions guiding all ongoing diplomatic activity is that a political agreement will alleviate the pressure on Europe and make Europe safer.

This CrisesAlert has two purposes. First, what are the threats from Libya to the EU? Why should we care and how are our societies impacted by the actions of Libyan militias and generals? This CrisesAlert will show that the simple answer is that some security interests are at stake, but that the situation is more complex than we think. Second, this CrisesAlert dives into the narrative that a political agreement will actually remove the Libyan threat to Europe and make Europe safer. But will it really? The simple answer is once again that the situation is more complex than we think. The CrisesAlert's three main takeaways are that:

1. The terrorism threat from Libya is real but comparatively small compared to the terrorism threat from within Europe and from Syria;
2. Mass migration is a danger to European societal stability, but the greater dangers involve the integration of traumatized migrants and increasing activity of European organized crime;

1 Varvelli, 2017. Time for action: EU and a new political initiative in Libya. ISPI, <http://www.ispionline.it/publicazione/time-action-eu-and-new-political-initiative-libya-16287>.

3. Russia may seek to challenge the EU in view of waning US interests, but Russian interests in Libya are far more likely to be narrow and economic rather than geopolitical in nature.

Libya terrorism threat: real but limited (at present)

The presence of terrorist groups in Libya is of great concern to Europe. However, any assessment of threats starts with a distinction being drawn between expansionist jihadist groups (IS) and jihadist groups (Shura councils and Al Sharia), whose priority is primarily domestic.

Libya's jihadists: expansionist vs. domestic jihadists

Libya, particularly the east of the country, has a jihadist tradition that goes back to the 1980s, when a wave of Libyan volunteers joined the fight against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. These veterans would go on to create the now defunct Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. A second wave of jihadists has fought in Iraq since 2003, bringing back more radical and anti-democratic ideology to Libya. A third wave comprises Libyan fighters active in Syria since 2011/2012.² While the latter wave has bred IS in Libya – an expansionist group – the first two waves have led to domestically focused jihadism.

2 Wehrey (2017). The Challenge of Violent Extremism in North Africa: The Case of Libya. Carnegie endowment, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/29/challenge-of-violent-extremism-in-north-africa-case-of-libya-pub-68446>.

Figure 1 Islamism violence 2016-2017

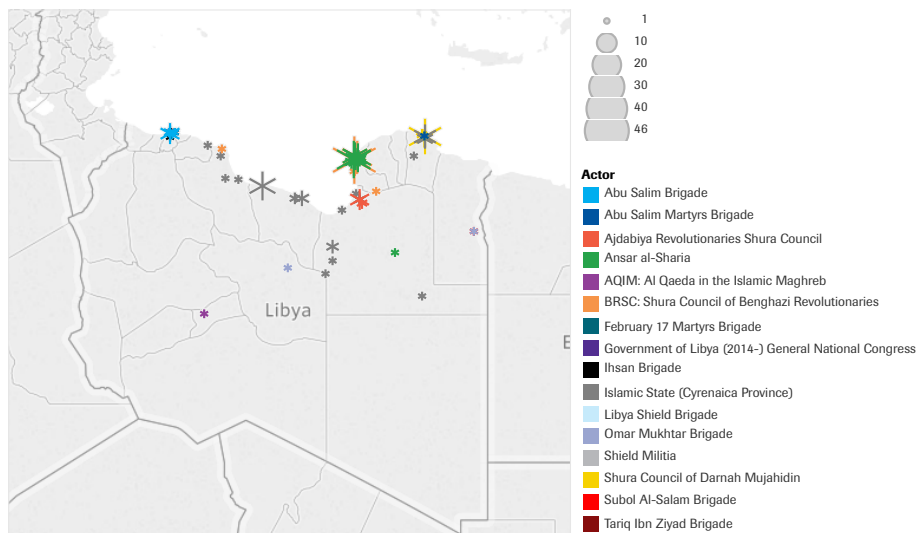


Figure 1 presents the most important Islamist militias in Libya. IS has had a presence in Libya since 2014 and has an expansionist agenda aimed at hitting Western targets in Libya and Europe. In June 2015, when IS was pushed out of Derna by Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, it seized control of Sirte. Under pressure from an anti-jihadi coalition, IS has since then established cells in Tripoli and Sabratha and sought to connect with other jihadist groups in Benghazi.

IS recruits include Libyan-grown fighters pledging allegiance to IS, but also hundreds of foreign fighters – notably from Tunisia, the Maghreb and the Sahel. Non-ideologically committed supporters such as members of Gaddafi-loyal tribes (the Warfalla and Qadhahfa) welcomed IS as a form of self-protection against hostile forces (for example from Misrata). The crackdown on IS in Iraq and Syria led IS to call on militants to seek refuge in Libya and branch out there. Over the course of one year, the Libyan branch of IS doubled in size to 6,000 fighters and 70% of IS in Sirte reportedly consisted of foreign

fighters.³ Libya went from being an exporter of foreign fighters to a destination for them.⁴ By the end of 2016, the GNA-led BAM initiative managed to defeat IS in Sirte.

Figure 1 also shows two major *domestic* Islamist groups in Libya. On the one hand, Ansar al-Sharia (AS) focuses on fighting domestic enemies and the establishment of Islamic law.⁵ Expansionist tendencies are limited to the region (North Africa and Sahel).⁶ AS is linked with Al-Qa'ida and has cross-country and transnational ties to other Al-Qa'ida-affiliated groups such as Al-Mourabitoun and AQIM.⁷ Thanks to the military campaign against IS, Ansar al-Shari'a saw a slight uptick in fighters when a number of IS agents reverted to the Al-Qa'ida brand.⁸ In May 2017, however, due to losses, AS announced that it would dissolve, while calling on Shura councils to present a united front.⁹

On the other hand, there are various Shura councils, most notably in Benghazi and Derna, aiming for territorial control (defeat of the LNA) and the introduction of Shari'a in Libya. For example, the Benghazi Revolutionary Shura Council (BRSC) has been fighting intermittently against the LNA (and allied militias), with Haftar's forces being accused of war crimes by international observers.¹⁰ In addition to the BRSC, Libya is home to a

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- 3 Barr & Greenberg (2016). Libya's Political Turmoil Allows Islamic State to Thrive. Terrorism Monitor 14 (7), The Jamestown Foundation, <https://jamestown.org/program/libyas-political-turmoil-allows-islamic-state-to-thrive/>; BBC (2016) Top IS commanders 'taking refuge' in Libya', <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35486158>; Bremmer (2017). The top 5 countries where ISIS gets its foreign recruits. Time, <http://time.com/4739488/isis-iraq-syria-tunisia-saudi-arabia-russia/>.
 - 4 Washington Post (2016). Islamic State, growing stronger in Libya, sets its sights on fragile neighbor Tunisia. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/islamic-state-threatens-fragile-tunisia-from-next-door-in-libya/2016/05/13/cd9bd634-f82e-11e5-958d-d038dac6e718_story.html?utm_term=.e72488407736
 - 5 Although it gained notoriety for the 2012 attack against the US consulate in Benghazi that killed the ambassador and three others, CNN (2013). Benghazi Mission Attack Fast Facts, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/09/10/world/benghazi-consulate-attack-fast-facts/>
 - 6 Stanford (2016). Mapping Militant Organizations: Ansar al-Shariah (Libya), <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/545>
 - 7 http://www.ecfr.eu/mena/mapping_libya_conflict#
 - 8 Wehrey (2017). Insecurity and governance challenges in Southern Libya. Carnegie Endowment, 16, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/30/insecurity-and-governance-challenges-in-southern-libya-pub-68451>; and Toaldo (2017). A quick guide to Libya's main players. ECFR, http://www.ecfr.eu/mena/mapping_libya_conflict.
 - 9 Reuters (2017). Libyan Islamist group Ansar al-Sharia says it is dissolving. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-idUSKBN18N0YR>
 - 10 El-Gamaty (2017). International bodies are ignoring Haftar's war crimes in Libya. Al Araby, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/Comment/2017/3/29/International-bodies-are-ignoring-Haftars-war-crimes-in-Libya>.

patchwork of Salafi groups and Islamist-leaning militias, such as the Benghazi Defence Brigades, which have joined in the fight against Haftar's forces (see figure 1).

On the ground, the common enemy in the form of Haftar's LNA forces results in pragmatic forms of cooperation: some local Islamist militias in Benghazi cooperated with IS on the battlefield,¹¹ and reports suggest that even IS fighters and Al-Qa'ida affiliates are cooperating on the ground.¹² Yet, rivalry between Al-Qa'ida-affiliated (pockets of) jihadists and IS elements is likely to prevail.

How is Libya a terrorist threat to Europe?

The distinction between domestic and external jihadists highlights the fact that jihadist activity in Libya has been felt first and foremost in Libya, by the Libyans themselves. The threat to Europe has been less immediate, less direct and is easily overstated (if only because not all Libyan jihadist groups are interested in targeting Europe). Moreover, terrorism in Europe is primarily a 'home-grown' problem involving Europeans who have turned jihadi: Europe is under attack from its own citizens.

It is true that some European jihadis have been inspired, encouraged or concerted by IS, which could put Libya on the threat map. Yet, in these instances it was mainly the IS-Levant branch that was involved. Hence, the Libyan conflict is a significant yet comparatively minor factor contributing to the total terrorism threat to Europe. Within these limitations there are two specific threats.

A gateway to Europe?

A first threat is that terrorist organizations mainly settle in places that are relatively well connected – because that makes it possible to reach and attract recruits and frighten adversaries. For this reason, Libya's proximity to Europe remains a cause for concern. In 2015, IS prized Libya for its location in the heart of North Africa and on the outskirts of Europe. In its propaganda, it presented plans detailing how it would unleash "pandemonium" in Europe by hijacking migrant boats.¹³

11 Wehrey (2017). The Challenge of Violent Extremism in North Africa: The Case of Libya. Carnegie endowment, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/29/challenge-of-violent-extremism-in-north-africa-case-of-libya-pub-68446>

12 Toaldo (2017). A quick guide to Libya's main players. ECFR, http://www.ecfr.eu/mena/mapping_libya_conflict.

13 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/isis-plans-to-use-immigrant-boats-from-libya-to-cause-terror-in-europe-and-close-shipping-routes-10053148.html>

To date there have been few indications of physical infiltration of IS agents through Libya, except for a recent Italian report stating that IS is trying to infiltrate fighters into Europe (through a wounded soldier resettlement scheme).¹⁴ The idea that terrorists are entering Europe *en masse* on migrant boats is wrong. There are stronger indications that IS in Libya has been involved in support of IS operatives in Europe. Intelligence services uncovered support ties between IS operatives from Libya and the Berlin attacker Anis Amri, and connections between the Al-Battar brigade of IS in Libya and Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the Paris attacks ringleader.¹⁵ Most links were distant (for example through online communication), but the 22-year-old Libyan-British terrorist Salman Abedi, who spent three weeks in Libya before traveling to Manchester, highlights the fact that contact may be more extensive (even when IS is 'officially defeated'). It remains to be investigated whether Abedi had contact with terrorist operatives while in Libya, and if so with whom, and to what extent his stay in Libya facilitated the Manchester attack.¹⁶

The right context

A second threat is that Libya remains an attractive host and training ground for jihadists. Libya offers good conditions for terrorist groups to flourish: a jihadist legacy, economic crisis, a weak and failing government, fragmentation and armed conflict.¹⁷ Hence, while IS has been defeated territorially in Libya and there are hardly any expansionist groups in the country, it is quite possible that new groups could emerge. IS thrived, for example, on the *escalation of violence* in 2014 by exploiting the grievances and insecurity of marginalized and oppressed groups. Exclusionary practices that served as a catalyst for previous expansionist jihadists are far from over, particularly now that one of Libya's most divisive forces – General Haftar – has become the country's strongman. IS – or a new mutation of jihadism – may well benefit from the next peak in factional fighting in

14 The Independent (2015). Isis plans to use immigrant boats from Libya to cause terror in Europe and close shipping routes. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/28/islamic-state-fighters-infiltrate-europe-posing-injured-libyan-soldiers>

15 Guardian (2017). Italy fears Isis fighters slip into Europe posing as injured Libyans. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/28/islamic-state-fighters-infiltrate-europe-posing-injured-libyan-soldiers> and CNN (2015). Who was Abdelhamid Abaaoud, suspected ringleader of Paris attack? <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/11/16/europe/paris-terror-attack-mastermind-abdelhamid-abaaoud/>.

16 CNN (2017). Manchester attack: why the Libyan connection matters. <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/24/opinions/britain-libya-terror-connection/>

17 Wehrey (2017). The Challenge of Violent Extremism in North Africa: The Case of Libya. Carnegie endowment, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/29/challenge-of-violent-extremism-in-north-africa-case-of-libya-pub-68446>; DE Bruijne (2017). Assessing local and global conditions for jihadist franchising. ICCT (forthcoming).

Libya. During Misrata-LNA clashes, IS operatives tried, for example, to set up shop in Bani Walid and may do so again.¹⁸

Finally, IS has effectively inserted itself into the seams of the conflict and IS remnants have regrouped, taking refuge in Libyan cities and operating cells in Tripoli. IS forces have fled to the border of Sudan and desert valleys south of Sirte, with a residual presence around the town of Sabratha (a hub for Tunisian jihadists). Moreover they have claimed at least four attacks since the defeat.¹⁹ IS's presence South of Sebha should not be overstated; it is an ideal hideout and logistical pipeline for pockets of jihadists, but established Al-Qa'ida-affiliated networks prevent meaningful penetration of these lands by IS.²⁰ There are some indications that remnants of IS Libya branches are starting to coordinate attacks against Europeans with Libyan help, the Manchester attack possibly being a first example.²¹

Deal or no deal?

Regardless of the twists and turns in the conflict, it is likely that the 'jihadi appeal' in Libya will remain. Salafi-jihadi groups in Libya have historically tapped into pent-up grievances and marginalization of the local population (mainly in the east). Whether a deal is signed or not is unlikely to make a major difference as long as exclusion and oppression prevail and the jihadi engine receives fuel.

The future of jihadist threats to Europe with continued armed conflict does not look bright.²² With Haftar probably taking power militarily and targeting anyone remotely associated with political Islam, it is likely that frustration and resentment will build up among large swaths of the Muslim population. Radical jihadists are well placed to reap

18 ACAPS (2017). Risk Report: Libya Scenarios, <http://reliefweb.int/report/libya/risk-report-libya-scenarios-23-february-2017>.

19 Toaldo (2017). A quick guide to Libya's main players. ECFR, http://www.ecfr.eu/mena/mapping_libya_conflict; see also Eyes on Libya (2017). May 16, 2017: ISIS in action, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/10-16-may-isis-fighters-hijack-fuel-trucks/>; Eyes on Libya (2016). November 15, 2016: ISIS in action, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-15-nov-2016/>.

20 Wehrey (2017). Insecurity and governance challenges in Southern Libya. Carnegie Endowment, 16, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/30/insecurity-and-governance-challenges-in-southern-libya-pub-68451>

21 Zelin (2017). Manchester attack highlights foreign fighters in Libya. The Washington Institute: PolicyWatch 2810, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/manchester-attack-highlights-foreign-fighters-in-libya>.

22 Libyan Observer (2017). Renegade General Khalifa Haftar wants to rule Libya and rejects dialogue with rivals – Newspaper, <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/renegade-general-khalifa-haftar-wants-rule-libya-and-rejects-dialogue-rivals-newspaper>.

the rewards of such popular discontent.²³ Yet in the unlikely event of GNA success, jihadi support may also mushroom, even if it would probably be of the less expansionist type. Conversely, jihadist appeal is likely to continue even when a deal is brokered. Based on the notes on the alleged discussion between Haftar and Serraj (in Dubai on May 2) it appears that the exclusion of many “radical and moderate Islamists” will continue and that the group will not be given a political voice.²⁴ This is likely to ensure that grievances forming the basis of radicalism and violent extremism will not cease to exist and may push jihadists to new staging grounds. Particularly when such a deal is embraced by the international community, resentment and frustration with the West will aggravate and potentially result in an increase in the jihadi threat to Europe.

Russia and Libya: much ado about nothing?

A second threat emerged at the beginning of 2017 with Western concerns about Russia’s role in Libya. Not only did Haftar make a string of visit to Russia, but Russia took in wounded LNA fighters, pushed for a renewed agreement favouring the LNA (with Egypt and UAE), deployed a warship off the Libyan coast warning that it would fire and – most importantly – appeared to have special forces on the ground on the Egypt-Libya border.²⁵

Russian support for the LNA is neither new nor unparalleled (e.g. France also supports Haftar). Up to May 2016 Russia sent \$2.9 billion Libyan dinars to support the rival ‘Eastern’ Central Bank, there have been formal and informal contacts for a long time and there are rumours of a weapons deal.²⁶ Kremlinologists therefore fear that Russia will deliberately derail the LPA agreement, open up another proxy front and repeat its Syrian strategy. Reports that Russia is seeking an “early restoration of strong power in Libya” do not help.²⁷

23 Fitzgerald (2015). Finding their place: Libya’s Islamists during and after the 2011 uprising, in: Cole and McQuinn ed. *The Libyan revolution and its aftermath*. Oxford University Press.

24 Cusack (2017a). Truce in Libya? Haftar and Serraj agree to elections. The New Arab, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/5/3/truce-in-libya-haftar-and-serraj-agree-to-elections>.

25 Reuters (2017). Exclusive: Russia appears to deploy forces in Egypt, eyes on Libya role. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-libya-exclusive-idUSKBN16K2RY>.

26 Megerisi & Toaldo (2016). Russia in Libya, A Driver for Escalation? Carnegie Endowment, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/66391>.

27 Cusack (2017b). Putin refuses meeting with Libyan leader during official visit. The New Arab, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/3/1/putin-refuses-meeting-with-libyan-leader-during-official-visit>.

This context of deliberate Russian provocation requires deeper analysis, however. First, it is actually *unclear* what Russia really wants in Libya.²⁸ For example, Russian involvement with the LNA has historical explanations since the LNA inherited Russian weapons from the Cold War. Hence, whether Russian involvement constitutes a threat to Europe cannot be inferred from contact. Second, even if Russian activity in Libya is a real security threat, it is far from clear that an agreement is beneficial. In fact, it seems that an agreement could *increase* the threats to Europe.

Russian interests in Libya

Russian interests in Libya are driven by four factors. On the one hand, there are two interests that are related to a narrow Russian interest in protecting economic and security interests. If Russia is involved in Libya for these reasons, it is not posing a real threat to Europe. On the other hand there are two geopolitical interests. If these turn out to be driving Russian behaviour in Libya, Europe should be concerned and prepare for a bumpy fall. The question of which group of interests dominates is quite nebulous, however.

A first potential motivation for Russia is the presence of IS and jihadist groups in Libya that may be willing to attack Russians – as some Russian think tanks with ties to the Kremlin suggest.²⁹ While these claims should not be dismissed too readily – the recent St. Petersburg attacks and the ongoing struggle in Chechnya are directly connected to IS operations in Syria – it is unlikely that antiterrorism concerns top Russia's thinking. Russia barely contributed to the coalition that ousted IS last year and there are no indications that Russian foreign fighters have joined any of the jihadist groups in Libya.³⁰ A second reason concerns economic interests. Most prominently, Russia is seeking to reactivate a \$10 billion (Gaddafi-agreed) deal involving the construction of railroads and weapons supplies.³¹ Libya's economic reconstruction is another important price, as it enables Putin to secure support from his Russian crony power base. Finally, as Libya is exempted from OPEC production cuts, Russia is seeking oil deals: Rosneft and Libya's National Oil Corporation reached an agreement (February 2017) on exploration in Libyan

28 Mezran & Toaldo (2017). Libya can't save itself. Foreign Policy, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/23/can-trump-arrest-libyas-dwnward-spiral-civil-war-united-states/>; Lefèvre (2017). "The Pitfalls of Russia's Growing Influence in Libya." *The Journal of North African Studies* 22, no. 3.

29 Al Jazeera (2017). Can Russia resolve the conflict in Libya? <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/03/russia-resolve-conflict-libya-170316094138550.html>

30 Panel of Experts on Libya (2016). Final report of the Panel of Experts on Libya. United Nations Security Council S/2016/209.

31 Beccaro & Maass (2017). The Russian Web in the Mediterranean Region. ISPI, <http://www.ispionline.it/publicazione/russian-web-mediterranean-region-16372>.

oil fields.³² This deal is part of a broader Russian strategy executed by Rosneft. For a year Rosneft has been trying to secure deals in conflict-ridden but oil-rich countries (Iraq, Lebanon). While some point to geopolitical motivations for state-owned Rosneft's strategy, oil experts believe that Russian interests are driven by a business calculation: break-even costs in these areas are lower than in the cold Siberian heartland. Overall, Russian anti-Islamist and particularly economic interests are a nuisance as they involve competition for the same resources, but Russia's pursuit of these interests does not threaten European security interests.

Nevertheless there are also reasons to suspect a geopolitical motivation for Russian involvement in Libya. If this motivation proves dominant, European security interests may be at stake. A first potential geopolitical interest is that Russia is seeking access to the Mediterranean, especially since its new maritime strategy (2015) sought an expansion of Russian influence.³³ The strategy explicitly states that Russia is seeking "in the Mediterranean Sea... a sufficient naval presence of the Russian Federation".³⁴ Russia's only naval base in Tarsus (Syria) has been upgraded, the country modernized its Black Sea fleet, sought and probably secured a naval base in Egypt (at Sidi Barrani) and has secured access to European ports (Malta, Greece, Spain).³⁵ It is true that Russian activities in Libya could be understood in this context. Part of the \$10 billion dollar deal with Gaddafi included a naval base for Russia in Benghazi. Haftar is believed to have reached an agreement with Putin on a naval and air force base in Benghazi.³⁶ A second potential geopolitical interest is that Russia is aiming to regain great-power prominence and sees the Middle East as a perfect stage on which to do so. As it did in Syria, Russia aims to have a place at the table and force Western countries to re-engage. For this reason, it is claimed that Russia – after success in Syria – has cozied up with Egypt (joint military exercises, training/education and sharing of nuclear technology) – and is

32 While officially neutral and technocratic, the NOC leans towards Haftar's LNA.

33 Litsas (2017). Russia in the Eastern Mediterranean: intervention deterrence, containment. *Digest of Middle East Studies* 26 (1), <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/dome.12103/abstract>.

34 Chuma (2016). The Mediterranean: driving Russia's strategic decision since 1676. Center for International Maritime Security, <http://cimsec.org/mediterranean-driving-russias-strategic-decisions-since-1676/30070>.

35 Sputnik (2017). What's behind Russia ramping up its military presence in the Mediterranean. <https://sputniknews.com/military/201702091050506738-russia-military-mediterranean/>; Nordby & Del Santo (2016). Russia's naval strategy in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Lowly Institute, <https://www.lowlyinstitute.org/the-interpret/russias-naval-strategy-black-sea-and-mediterranean>; Al Jazeera (2016). Russia's emerging naval presence in the Mediterranean. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/05/russia-emerging-naval-presence-mediterranean-160526074150359.html>.

36 Libyan Express (2016). Putin envisions military base on Benghazi coast as Khalifa Haftar arrives in Russia to request arms. <http://www.libyanexpress.com/putin-envisions-military-base-on-benghazi-coast-as-khalifa-haftar-arrives-in-russia-to-request-arms/>.

seeking a new theatre in which to flex its muscles.³⁷ In this scenario, Libya would indeed seem to be a good candidate. There is internal division in Europe over the policy to adopt (France, Italy and Britain do not see eye to eye) and US president Trump has repeatedly shown he has little interest in Libya. Libya could be Putin's geopolitical test-case for challenging Europe.³⁸

Russia in Libya: a threat to Europe?

It is unlikely, however, that geopolitical reasons dominate the Russian agenda. There are numerous reasons for this. First and foremost, it is not only Russia's decision to make. Haftar relies on Egypt and the UAE for support, and despite good relations with Russia is not dependent on Russia (consider how different this was in Syria). Moreover, for this reason Haftar does not need to risk being drawn into a geopolitical conflict that jeopardizes his chances of securing control of Libya.

A geopolitical motivation for Russian activity in Libya is also unlikely from a Russian perspective. Constructing a naval base in Benghazi is a very long-term strategy that involves significant risks. In the first place, neither the LNA nor the GNA has complete control of Benghazi, so building up a naval base will be complicated. Furthermore, a Russian naval base in Benghazi will surely spark a major European response as Benghazi is close to Italy. Finally, it is unlikely that Russia – given its shrinking international reserves and economic crises – will have the financial means for power projection that has only marginal benefits. Investing in non-Libyan projects such as further upgrading the Russian Black Sea Fleet, the naval base in Tarsus and trying to gain access to the Egyptian naval base would yield better risk-return tradeoffs for Russia's naval strategy. Libya is neither the only nor the best option to secure Russian naval interests. Additionally, Libya does not figure prominently in Russian debates on national security. The new Russian foreign policy concept (2016) does not mention Libya and is very strongly focused on the Middle East, stretching as far as Egypt. The Libya situation is not debated at Russian security conferences.

A second reason to believe that Russia is not motivated by substantial geopolitical interests is simply that economic interests square better with Russia's very cautious strategy. Despite unproven rumours of weapon shipments, Russia has not really contributed to Haftar's fight, except for sending a shipload of money in May 2016. Instead, Russia has approved all UN resolutions on Libya, continues to support the LPA

37 Beccaro & Maass (2017). The Russian Web in the Mediterranean Region. ISPI, <http://www.ispionline.it/publicazione/russian-web-mediterranean-region-16372>.

38 Reuters (2017). Link Seen Between Russia and Libyan Commander Haftar: U.S. General. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-03-24/link-seen-between-russia-and-libyan-commander-haftar-us-general>.

agreement and also supports a renewed agreement. Moreover, Russia has kept good relations with all sides (Al-Sarraj has also visited Russia). This cautious strategy seems to show that whatever the outcome, Russia hopes to have an opportunity to secure (at least) economic interest and a place at the negotiating table. Russian influence in Libya is therefore likely to be mainly a nuisance and not a real security threat to Europe.

But what if Russia is indeed motivated by geopolitical interests? In that case, the EU strategy of seeking an agreement may not be the best bet.³⁹ An agreement is most likely to give a prominent role to Russian/Egyptian-backed Haftar in the future of Libya, and will only *increase* the chances that Russia could secure a maritime presence in Benghazi, in turn giving Russia a place at the table. Instead, continued violence – while obviously bad for the Libyan people – is more likely to halt Russian maritime ambitions, deny the photo-op for having negotiated another agreement and will give the EU time to counter Russia's Mediterranean rapprochement. If Russia is indeed motivated by geopolitical interests, the EU faces a conundrum that may not be best addressed by seeking an agreement.

Securitizing migration: overlooking real threats

In key EU member states, a notion of African migration being a security threat to Europe has gained traction and constitutes a third major reason for European interest in Libya. Used as a tool for anti-establishment and anti-EU mobilization, this notion conjures up an image of massive and uncontrolled migration flows harbouring scores of radical jihadists. Proponents of this notion mix facts (transit migration from Libya is up for the third year in a row) with fiction (800,000 migrants and jihadists are lying in wait to make the crossing into Europe).⁴⁰ In the process, 'migration' has become the main political cleavage in many EU member states and has pitted member states against each other and against EU institutions. The response has been one of border externalization and increasing securitized approaches to stem migration from Libya.

One problem with this response is that it has diverted attention away from the real policy dilemma at issue: the EU's inability to reform its internal migration and asylum system, as well as the tensions among EU member states and between EU member states and EU

39 Kozhanov (2017). Moscow's presence in Libya is a new challenge for the West. Chatham house, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/moscow-s-presence-libya-new-challenge-west?utm_source=Chatham%20House&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=8342340_Publication%20Alert%20Nikolay%20Kozhanov%20EC%2030052017&dm_i=1S3M,4YSZO,OKNEF7,IWWT5,1.

40 Recent evidence suggests that IS fighters use different methods to travel to Europe. Guardian (2017). Italy fears Isis fighters slip into Europe posing as injured Libyans. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/28/islamic-state-fighters-infiltrate-europe-posing-injured-libyan-soldiers>.

institutions on how to tackle the need for reform and ease the burden on EU countries of first arrival such as Italy and Greece. A second problem is that we risk overlooking two more realistic security threats. These are: 1) the increased exploitation of transit migrants in Libya and at other points along the migratory route; and 2) the growth of a transnational organized criminal smuggling industry and its ties to trafficking in human beings.

Exploitation of transit migrants and integration

The deteriorating security situation in Libya, the involvement of armed groups in both human smuggling and anti-smuggling operations, and the criminalization of (transit) migrants in Libya have resulted in increased commoditization of migrants. In practice, this means that smugglers are not just interested in bringing migrants from point a to point b. Instead, they have discovered that they can also make huge profits by keeping migrants trapped in one place – usually a detention centre. In the process, migrants have become vulnerable to all sorts of abuse, such as being sold on slave markets, being pushed into forced labour and prostitution, extortion, torture and detentions.⁴¹ One survey found that 44 per cent of surveyed migrants had reported witnessing migrant deaths in Libya and that 82 per cent of these deaths were attributed to physical abuse experienced in the country.⁴² The combination of detention with extortion – often taking the form of migrants being tortured while their families back home are forced to listen to these practices on the phone to coerce them into paying a ransom – has proven particularly traumatizing.⁴³

Moving beyond general humanitarian concerns, these issues are troubling because they often involve transit migrants with a very realistic asylum claim. Twenty per cent of transit migrants in Libya come from countries such as Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan. Their high odds of being rewarded asylum once they reach Europe⁴⁴ – combined with the fact that they can only apply for asylum once they get to Europe – means that a substantial group of newly integrating citizens has been subjected to the highest level

41 Migrant journeys have become likened to a human conveyer belt, meaning that once migrants get caught up in these dynamics it is impossible for them to get out again. See Micallef (2017). *The Human Conveyer Belt: trends in human trafficking and smuggling in post-revolution Libya. The global initiatives against transnational organized crime.*

42 Mixed Migration Hub (2017). Survey Snapshot, January 2017, <http://www.mixedmigrationhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Italy-MHub-Survey-Snapshot-Jan-2017.pdf>.

43 Van Reisen & Mawere (2017). *Human Trafficking in the Digital Era: The Ongoing Tragedy of the Trade in Refugees from Eritrea.* African Books Collective.

44 European countries granted 90% of Eritrean asylum and protection requests in 2015, 92.5% in 2016 and 93.3% in the first quarter of 2017. For Somalia, the number of granted requests increased from 63% (2015) to 75% (first quarter 2017), while the number of granted requests for Sudanese citizens dropped slightly from 57% (2015) to 52% (first quarter 2017). Eurostat (2017). *Asylum and first-time asylum applicants*, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-datasets/-/tps00189>.

of trauma measurable, which continues to influence their ability to function once they reach Europe. Recent research has shown that such trauma also extends to diaspora communities that see themselves confronted with the mistreatment of their fellow countrymen and women, as well as by the apparent inability (and/or unwillingness) of the international community to address these human rights violations.⁴⁵ At the very least, this development threatens to alienate newly arrived refugees and diaspora communities from their host countries.

The smuggling industry and its ties to trafficking in human beings

Related to this issue, a second security threat that follows from the exploitative networks that operate in Libya is that these practices also extend to Europe. The human smuggling industry is one of the fastest-growing criminal sectors in Europe and has become a criminal market that is comparable to the drug market in terms of size, profit and sophistication. In addition, an increase is evident in the trafficking of human beings for labour exploitation in Europe. This sector is expected to expand further due to the presence of a large supply of vulnerable migrants, such as unaccompanied children.⁴⁶ The inability of the European Union to set up a functioning system to quickly register and process transit migrants once they reach Europe is playing into the hands of these groups that prey on the weak. This applies especially to unaccompanied child refugees, who are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. In early 2016, Europol already reported that at least 10,000 unaccompanied child refugees had disappeared after arriving in Europe.⁴⁷ This number will only increase, as unaccompanied child refugees constitute an increasingly large part of migration flows.

Will a new agreement reduce migration?

The question remains whether migration dynamics would halt if the Libyan conflict were to end as a result of a political agreement and/or an EU-Libya deal being struck. The short answer is that it is complicated. Libya has traditionally been a destination country for African and Asian migrants. It was not until the early 2000s, following the repression of transit migration in Tunisia, that Libya also became an important transit country for migrants traveling to Europe. Pressure from the Italian authorities to receive and process

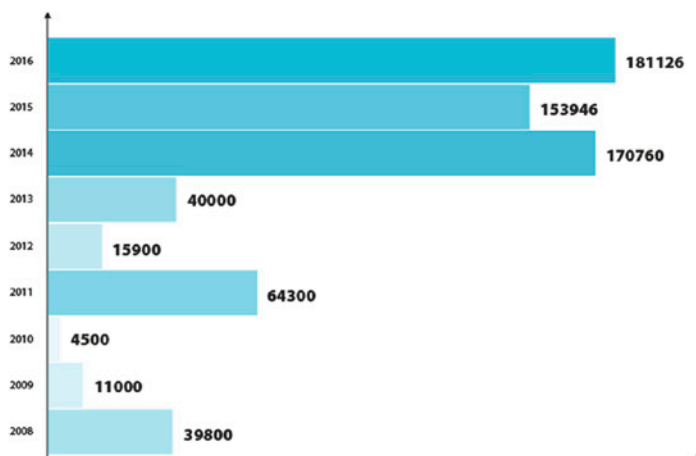
45 Van Reisen & Mawere (2017). Human Trafficking in the Digital Era: The Ongoing Tragedy of the Trade in Refugees from Eritrea. African Books Collective.

46 SOCTA (2017). EU serious and organized crime threat assessment 2017, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-serious-and-organised-crime-threat-assessment-2017>; Digidiki & Bhaba (2015). Emergency within and emergency. Harvard University, Centre for Health and human rights, <https://cdn2.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2017/04/Emergency-Within-an-Emergency-FXB.pdf>

47 Guardian (2016). 10,000 refugee children are missing, says Europol, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/30/fears-for-missing-child-refugees>.

irregular migrants resulted in political agreements between the two countries, such as the Libyan-Italian Friendship treaty, that allowed for the containment and pushback of migration in Libya. The subsequent drop in migrants transiting to Europe only lasted as long, however, as the (Gaddafi) regime remained capable of enforcing order.

Figure 2



Source: <http://frontex.europa.eu/trends-and-routes/central-mediterranean-route/>

The fall of Gaddafi and the ensuing changes in irregular transit migration flows underline the highly temporary nature of deals that outsource borders to transit countries. The number of migrants quickly rose in response to the conflict dynamics that started in 2011 (see figures 2 and 3). The 2012 election of a post-transitional General National Congress – ending the first conflict phase – contributed to the state authorities managing somewhat to contain migration again. It was not until the relapse into violent conflict in 2014 that migration figures really rose through the roof. At the same time, figure 3 shows that the decrease in violent events from 2015 onwards did not correspond to a decrease in transit migration. In other words, it would be mistaken to expect that an end to the Libyan conflict will result in a drop in transit migration *per se*.

Figure 3 Conflict Phases in Libya



Measure Names

Migration Western Route

Number of Conflict Events

The reason for this is that smuggling and anti-smuggling operations have become deeply engrained within Libya’s armed groups that constitute the country’s *de facto* authorities. These groups’ control over local zones of influence allows them to tax, protect and/or actively control human smuggling and trafficking operations, while their control over detention centres – where irregular migrants are held once they are detected within Libya or at sea and exploited for financial gains – provides these groups with an additional source of income and contributes to the consolidation of their sphere of influence.⁴⁸ The adoption of a political agreement would mainly entail incorporating these groups into formal state structures, which would do little to increase the Libyan state’s capacity to address smuggling and exploitation.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

The Libyan conflict is considered to involve security interests of the European Union most notably from migration, terrorism and as a theatre for a future confrontation with Russia. Indeed, European security is at stake in Libya, but the degree to which and the ways in which European security interests are at stake are not well understood.

48 Molenaar en El Kamouni (2017). Turning the Tide. Clingendael Institute.

First, the terrorism threat from Libya is obviously real. However, Europe primarily has an internal jihadi problem rather than imported problems from countries like Libya. Terrorism threats in Libya derive from the fact that Libya remains a gateway to Europe and the fact that jihadi potential in the country remains a fertile ground for new expansionist jihadism. Second, it is unlikely that Russian interests are geopolitical in nature. Instead, its cautious strategy and the implausibility of backing a confrontation suggest that it is motivated by narrow nationalist economic interests. Finally, rather than transporting 'terrorists' or undermining societal stability, the real migration 'threat' stems from traumatized migrants who are granted asylum in Europe. Another concern is that there is increasing activity among *European* organized crime syndicates in Libya.

It is clear that one of the assumptions upon which diplomatic interventions are built is not proven: a political agreement will not make the EU safer. An agreement will include a major role for Haftar and is very likely to reignite a violent jihadi backlash. Moreover, if Russia is indeed motivated by geopolitical interests, an agreement will leave Russia better placed to pursue interests such as a naval base and securing a credible position at the negotiating table. Finally, migratory pressures will not reduce with an agreement. The biggest danger is that an agreement will counter the stream of transit migrants traveling from Libya to Europe but leave unaddressed the practices of human enslavement, forced labour and abuse that have become an important source of income for a wide spectrum of militias and business elites and that actively pushes migrants into Europe. This will make it impossible to re-establish Libya's position as the alternative migration destination that it has traditionally been. What, then, does the EU need to do?

1. Regardless of whether there is an agreement, a continued and stable low terrorism threat to Europe needs a strategy to limit Egypt-backed Haftar's campaign of targeting everyone with remotely Islamic goals. As long as the root cause of marginalization, exclusion and resentment continues to be present it is unlikely that Europe will be safe.
2. The EU will have to counter Russia-Mediterranean rapprochement if Russia does have geopolitical ambitions. This could involve supporting the GNA militarily to counterbalance Russia's ally LNA, disrupting the Russian-LNA alliance by winning over Al-Sissi, assuming a robust presence in the country through crisis management tools or – if the internal division cannot be overcome through a forceful strategy – buying off Russia.
3. The EU needs to consider the following when attempting to counter migration:
 - a. *Working with (former) armed groups to counter the stream of transit migrants.* Armed groups are increasingly involved in anti-smuggling operations, such as through their control of detention centres. As well as providing them with a profit, participation in such operations allows the armed groups to regain a position of authority and to stake out a claim to be included in formal state

- structures. Collaboration with the international community in the field of migration offers a glimmer of hope for security rents, such as development money, trainings and equipment. If the international community is willing to pay for this, it is quite possible that (former) armed groups could be mobilized to counter the stream of transit migrants. In practice, however, this would entail paying off (groups linked to) smugglers to stop smuggling.
- b. *Increasing the protection of migrants within Libya.* On the one hand, protecting migrants may act as a pull factor attracting new transit migrants who had postponed their travel due to accounts of migrant abuses. On the other hand, Libya has long also functioned as a destination country for migrants. A recent report by the Mixed Migration Hub suggests that up to 34% of surveyed migrants were driven out of Libya because they felt that their lives were in danger there, rather than deciding to migrate to Europe.⁴⁹ Increasing the protection of migrants could prevent fewer migrants from traveling on to Europe out of sheer need – while maintaining our commitment to human rights protection and without paying off smugglers.

49 Mixed Migration Hub (2017). Survey Snapshot, January 2017, <http://www.mixedmigrationhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Italy-MHub-Survey-Snapshot-Jan-2017.pdf>.