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Libya's nightmare scenario

The possibility of Libya taking over from Syria and Iraq as the centre of Islamic State operations is haunting decision-makers in Cairo

Ahmed Eleiba

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Islamic State (IS) is consolidating its presence in Libya, where post-Gaddafi chaos has provided an ideal climate for the terrorist organisation to flourish. It encountered a setback in Derna,

where it faced stiff resistance from the Ansar Al-Sharia militia group which, in April 2014, expelled IS forces from the city, but 18 months later IS has recouped its losses.

Ansar Al-Sharia is no longer an obstacle to the group's expansion. Some of its factions have actually joined IS while others have withdrawn from the field, providing IS with an opportunity to move into areas close to Libya's oil-producing heartlands.

As IS expands its presence in Sirte, speculation that the organisation is seeking to shift its centre of operations from Syria and Iraq to Libya and North Africa has reached fever pitch.

Military developments are unfolding rapidly. Last week the Pentagon confirmed that Abu Nabil Al-Iraqi, leader of the IS franchise in Derna, was killed in a US raid in November. At the same time, the Libyan army reported that it was engaged in an air campaign against Ansar Al-Sharia targets in Benghazi.

A Libyan government official visiting Cairo told Al-Ahram Weekly that IS expansion is not limited to Sirte. It extends towards Ajdabiya and south from Sirte to central and southern Libya, where the organisation has established a network of alliances with Libyan extremist groups.

The source added, "Certain Arab countries, such as Qatar, supply the extremist militia factions with arms, as does Turkey." He predicts that Libya will soon become a centre for IS operations, the heart of a complex web of alliances with groups that include Boko Haram in Nigeria, Chad and Mali, and the Macina Liberation Front.

Declarations of allegiance to IS are "spreading like wildfire" among tribes in the areas where the organisation is expanding, and fighters are moving from Syria and Iraq to Libya in ever-increasing numbers.

The developments are causing great concern in Cairo. Egypt is now focussed on providing all possible help to the Libyan army as it confronts IS and there is coordination "at the highest levels" between Egyptian and Libyan officials.

Yet this vital relationship is frowned upon in some Western capitals, according to the Libyan official. He singled out London and Washington as the worst offenders. The UK, he said, "is working to partition Libya" while the US "hopes, through its ally Turkey, to reap the spoils of chaos."

Colonel Ahmed Al-Mismari, spokesman for the Libyan chief of staff, agrees. He points to Benghazi as one centre where extremist organisations currently fighting in Libya meet.

"There are three main jihadist groups in Libya: IS, the Benghazi Revolutionary Brigades and Ansar Al-Sharia, which is the Al-Qaeda franchise in Libya. The Libyan air force is engaged in constant aerial attacks against areas where these groups are concentrated," said Al-Mismari.

The aim of the aerial campaign is to hamper the extremists' activities, prevent advances on the ground and, hopefully, to restrict their sphere of influence to the areas in Benghazi where they

are currently concentrated. But there is no support for the aerial attacks from Arab or European states, said Al-Mismari.

“Only Cairo is coordinating with Libya’s armed forces at the highest possible level. Libya will remember Egypt for the part it played in standing alongside the Libyan people from the outset of this crisis.”

Al-Mismari says the Libyan government “agrees with Cairo that what is happening in Derna, Benghazi and Sirte is the same as what is happening in Sinai.”

“This expansion in Libya will spill over into Egypt one way or another because of the cancer-like network of the groups involved and because it is part of the design of the groups’ funders, particularly Turkey and Qatar, though the Sudanese government is also complicit.”

NATO had made it clear that it will not act against IS in Libya in the absence of a national government to request such an action. The US, claims the Libyan official, evacuated its embassy in Libya as part of an agreement with extremist militias, which proves that lines of communication are open between them, whether direct or indirect.

Moscow, which has long advocated a united international coalition to fight terrorism, supports Cairo’s view that manifestations of terrorism across the region are part of the same phenomenon and must be fought wherever they surface.

Libyan officials say there are two possible explanations for developments in Libya. Either there is a sustained attempt to transfer IS’s centre of operations to Libya, or the focus on building an IS presence in Libya is an attempt to deflect attention away from the real confrontation in Syria and to foment divisions in the international campaign against IS.

Regardless, said Al-Mismari, there is little evidence of international will to mount an effective confrontation in Libya.

Cairo, say local sources, is closely following developments and knows that it is involved in a race against time to prevent the conflict spilling over the border. An Egyptian source who is in contact with Libyan officials said Cairo is working to build a coalition to intervene in Libya to fight terrorism and sees Moscow and the Libyan government as central to such a coalition.

He stressed that the subject was high on the agenda during Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu’s visit to Cairo on 23 November. The source added that the core group — Moscow, Cairo and the Libyan government — is trying to persuade European states to join. Although there is still optimism that some European countries will come on board, efforts so far have yielded little tangible results apart from the aerial surveillance that France has undertaken in Libya.

General Hisham Al-Halabi, military advisor at the Higher Nasser Military Academy, accuses the international community of a “conspiracy of silence” when it comes to developments in Libya.

“The US has drones that circle the region but do not intervene. The one positive sign is that there is a growing awareness of the threats that could face European countries from the export of jihadists based in Libya which might lead EU nations to harden their positions, particularly in the wake of November’s terrorist attacks in Europe,” Al-Halabi told the Weekly.

He believes Egypt is inclined to intervene but wants to do so alongside European states. Cairo, he said, acted in a considered and measured manner in Derna last year and any future intervention will be equally well calibrated and timed.

In the meantime, he stresses that Egypt must continue to strengthen the military presence on its Western front to prevent the cross-border infiltration of terrorist elements.