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In Libya and the Lessons of Afghanistan

By Kamran Bokhari
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A daily explanation of what matters and what doesn't in the world of geopolitics.

Afghanistan is a useful case to consider as Western powers plan to send arms to Libya.

Summary The United States' decision to arm anti-communist factions in Afghanistan during the 1980s inadvertently facilitated the emergence of transnational jihadism, which over the decades has spread across the Middle East. Nearly two generations later, Washington and its European allies are considering doing the same thing in Libya to fight the Islamic State. It is not clear that Western powers will follow through with the plan. Libya's problems have less to do with waging war than with the inability to make peace. Whether it is Libya (in its fifth year of conflict) or Afghanistan (in its 37th) they share the same conundrum: the absence of a social contract.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said on May 16 that the United Nations Security Council and the other countries involved in the negotiations to resolve the conflict in Libya were ready to provide Libya's new Government of National Accord (GNA) with weapons and training to fight the Islamic State (IS) and other jihadist entities. Speaking to reporters in Vienna, Kerry said that the GNA was the only entity that could unify the energy-rich North African state and defeat IS.

On the same day, the United States said it would not oppose a peace deal between the Afghan government and the Islamist insurgent group, Hizb-i-Islami, led by former Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Hizb-i-Islami was one of the biggest American-backed groups in the war

against the Soviets, but has been on Washington's global terrorist list since 2003. On May 15, a spokesman for Afghan President Ashraf Ghani announced Kabul was very close to finalizing a peace agreement with Hizb-i-Islami, which Kabul hopes will facilitate talks with the Taliban.

The Case of Libya

These two developments highlight a key problem the United States has struggled with for decades in the Middle East and South Asia – how to stabilize a country after backing certain factions in a civil war. Of all the countries affected by the Arab Spring, Libya is perhaps in the worst shape. Since the killing of former Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi in October 2011, the country has gone through three attempts to form a government. The GNA is the latest attempt, and seeks to bring together the earlier two authorities – the Tripoli-based General National Congress and the House of Representatives headquartered in Tobruk.

Not only is the GNA brand new, its two main components disagree on many issues and both are internally divided as well. Meanwhile, militias control various cities and regions of the country. Various jihadist forces have been trying to take advantage of the anarchy. The Libyan branch of IS, while nowhere near as strong as its parent entity in Syria and Iraq, has established itself in the Sirte region.

IS probably **doesn't control much territory**, since it is led by foreign fighters and so many militias are already competing. But any area of IS control in Libya allows it to use the country as a launch pad for attacks in Europe. This has increased fears of immigrants from North Africa, in light of the recent IS attacks in France and Belgium. It would also explain why U.S. Special Operations Forces have been deployed in Libya.

The limited American military personnel alone can engage in intelligence operations to take out high value targets. But degrading IS, al-Qaida and other jihadist forces in the country requires a strong government that can **establish rule of law** in the country. And before it can effectively take on the Islamic State and the jihadists, the GNA must have a national military institution and law enforcement agencies, which are much more than simply men and women with training and weapons. Without a social contract that most major stakeholders are willing to abide by, the GNA is just another faction and its forces yet another militia. That said, they do need weapons and training to subdue militias that resist the new authority. It is not clear what kind of weapons will be supplied, but they undermine the project of state building and will most likely end up with IS or in the hands of some other undesirable elements.

The Lessons of Afghanistan

The peace deal with Hizb-i-Islami is not going to make much of a difference because it is a small insurgent group. The bulk of the threat to the Afghan state comes from the Taliban. Further, Hizb-i-Islami already has had members in the Afghan parliament and Cabinet. But the most important thing to note is that the Taliban emerged as a successor force to Hizb-i-Islami in the mid-1990s. Pakistan shifted support from Hizb-i-Islami to the Taliban after the latter emerged as the most powerful faction in the civil war that raged from 1992 to 1996.

Throughout the war against the Soviets in the 1980s, Hizb-i-Islami remained the main insurgent force in a seven-group alliance, which was heavily armed by the United States, financed by Saudi Arabia and backed by Pakistani intelligence. Hizb-i-Islami more or less remained a major force even after the Soviets withdrew in 1989. In 1992, however, when the Islamist insurgent alliance succeeded in toppling Afghanistan's communist regime, the allies began fighting with each other after not being able to reach a power-sharing arrangement. Over the next four years, the war among those who had been united against the communists led to the emergence of the Taliban.

By the time the 9/11 attacks took place, the Taliban were in control of most of the country. The U.S. move to effect regime change facilitated the return of most of those factions that had fought against the Soviets, except Hizb-i-Islami. The anti-Taliban forces have presided over [the fledgling Afghan state](#), locked in two conflicts – one with the Taliban insurgency and one with each other. This infighting is a key reason the Afghan state was never able to consolidate, which allowed for the resurgence of the Taliban.

The administration of former President Hamid Karzai (2002-14) was able to muddle along in great part because of the presence of American and NATO forces that helped contain the Taliban. With the drawdown of Western troops, the current Afghan forces under Ghani are having a tough time fighting off the Taliban, who have increased their bombings and taken territory in different parts of the country. The growing divisions in the Afghan state are a major benefit to the Taliban. The most glaring example of this is that Ghani was forced to share power with his rival, Abdullah Abdullah, who claimed fraud in the elections.

The solution, designed by Kerry, was to leave Ghani as president and create a new post of chief executive for Abdullah. Since then, the two have had an uneasy relationship. Meanwhile, warlords ruling in different provinces in various parts of the country continue to resist the central government. Therefore, at a time like this, Hizb-i-Islami's return to the fold is bound to add to the fracturing of the Afghan state.

The Taliban are taking advantage of this chaos in the battlespace and thus are in no mood to seriously negotiate. The fear is that the more this trend continues, the more state security forces will defect. In that situation, the weapons and training that the United States provided to the Afghan state could once again end up [in the hands of the jihadist insurgents](#).

Compared to Afghanistan, Libya is still very early in this cycle of militia violence that benefits transnational jihadists. But despite the lessons of Afghanistan (and also Iraq) no one seems to be moving away from worst practices.