



Centro Studi Internazionali

ANALYSIS OF POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO THE CRISIS IN LIBYA

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In recent weeks, with the Libyan civil war as a backdrop, we have witnessed the Caliphate of Bayda's overpowering entrance into the scene, a jihadist organisation based in Derna and officially affiliated to the Islamic State of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Indeed, taking advantage of the serious instability that has characterised Libya since 2011 and in the context of the confrontation between the Operation Dignity secular militia and the Operation Dawn Islamist militia, the jihadist forces launched an unexpected attack aiming to conquer the country, starting from the city of Sirte and with the objective of reaching Tripoli.

The recent advance of the Caliphate of Bayda's militia on Sirte and the beheading of 21 Egyptian Copti Christians, who had been abducted last January 1, have undeniably brought out the true extent of the jihadist threat in Libya. As much as the events that took place in Cyrenaica have shaken the attention of the world's media, the spread and growth of Libyan Islamic radicalism represents a historic phenomenon, from before the fall of Gadhafi in 2011, as well as being original and distinct from al-Qaida's network and agenda. Nevertheless, the events following the Revolution of February 17, the outbreak of the civil war between the secular population and the Islamists, the extreme political, tribal and social fragmentation of the country and its economic plight helped create the ideal conditions for the spread of the jihadist agenda. In fact, apart from military skills,

substantially identical to that of the other Libyan militias, the Caliphate of Bayda has demonstrated that they possess remarkable political and strategic skills, managing to win over tribal networks and to unify the local militias, both the extremist and non-extremist ones, under the umbrella of the Sharia and jihad. Furthermore, compared to other militias, the Caliphate has placed the emphasis on the administration of the territory and on the social dimension of aiding the population, attempting to set up a para-state reality that can assert itself as the real power in the area and thus compensate for the shortcomings of the legitimate central institutions.

For Libya, 2014 was the year of the segmentation of the civil war into two fronts: the secular Nasserite front of General Haftar and the Tobruk Government; and the Islamist one of the Tripoli government, flanked by a collection of local militias, some dangerously close to the jihadist movement. However, this division appears to be a political ploy to differentiate between the warring parties and does not reflect the political and military realities of the battlefield, with variable alliances and a web of magmatic and flexible agreements. One of the more troubling statistics is that neither side seems to have the strength required to prevail over the other and, above all, the Tobruk and Tripoli governments are still far from any form of dialogue or confrontation. It appears unlikely that, in the future, this situation will improve without incisive

intervention from the international community.

In this anarchic and ungovernable situation, in recent months, the dark shadow of the Caliphate has spread. In fact, in November 2014 in Derna, the proclamation of the birth of the Caliphate and the following oath of allegiance to the Islamic State and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi have added a new piece to the Libyan mosaic. The birth of the Caliphate in Libya, named "Bayda" in honour of the old Arabic name of Cyrenaica, was not an impromptu event, but rather the result of internal Libyan political phenomena and current international contingencies.

Derna has always been one of the major Salafi areas in Libya, however, it was never closely linked to al-Qaeda, as evidenced by several factors: the Islamist uprisings against Gaddafi in the 80s and 90s as well as the continuous flow of militants to fight both the anti-American jihad in Iraq in 2003 and the current uprising in Syria and Iraq that started in 2012.

Last spring, some Salafi militants from Derna, called the "Battar Group", who had fought on the side of the Islamic State, returned home and created the Islamic Youth Shura Council (IYSC). Such formation, while not being part of either Ansar al-Sharia or the Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries, which collects various Libyan Islamist militias from Cyrenaica under a into a single group, fought alongside them against rival militias and later against Haftar's forces. In

September, with the arrival of al-Azdi, the IYSC intensified its proselytism and propaganda actions in the Derna area, especially in rural areas adjacent to the city since the urban core was controlled by their rivals from the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade. In the future, there is the possibility that the Caliphate of Bayda, strengthened by their military conquests in the field, gather under their authority the militias that had previously been part of the Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries, including Ansar al-Sharia, the Brigade of February 17 Martyrs, the Rafallah Sahati Brigade, the Misurata militia and the militia called Libya Revolutionaries Operations Room (LROR).

To date, with the declaration of the birth of the Caliphate, the Libyan veterans of the Syrian-Iraqi war pose a new challenge to the inconsistent and unpredictable political architecture and national security. In fact, while on one hand the international community will try to promote dialogue between Tobruk and Tripoli to facilitate the formation of a moderate front and support the actions of Haftar, on the other hand the experience and assertiveness of the IYSC will attempt to compact and reunite the jihadist formations under the banner of the Islamic Libyan State. Therefore, Libya not only risks being torn apart by civil war and the polarisation of the political landscape, but also transformed, if the international action is ineffective, into a Salafi sanctuary just a stone's throw from the Italian coast.

It seems possible that, in the coming months, the activities of the new Caliphate of Bayda will intensify and that the jihadist threat will develop from being a local threat to being a national and then an international one. Unfortunately, the creation of a para-state terrorist matrix at the gates of Europe puts Libya at a real risk of becoming a hotbed of militants ready to strike not only in Africa, but also in the Old Continent. The key for the jihadist networks' success is winning over the tribal networks and the ability to form alliances with local militias. Again, the events in Sirte are examples of the Bayda Caliphate's strategy, replacing the Senussi family, the ancient Libyan royal house, as dominant player in the city, integrating within its ranks some armed gangs that were previously connected to Ansar al-Sharia.

The birth of the Caliphate undoubtedly forces European countries to reconsider their foreign policy and defence strategy. The Italian diplomats, in line with the trend that emerged in 2014, should continue the process of creating a united front for stabilising Libya. In the last months of 2014, during the NATO and G8 summits, the government had opened an important channel of negotiations with the United Kingdom, and then continued intensive talks with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, two leading Arab players engaged in the fight against the Islamic Libyan radical militia. Libya is, in fact, a theatre where many Middle Eastern actors are developing a role. The search for stability also involves a close

dialogue with these realities. The Italian government has shown that it fully understands these dynamics thanks to its diplomatic position. Relations between Rome and Abu Dhabi, for example, have grown in intensity in recent years and today the UAE is one of the most important Italian partners in the region. Furthermore, the Italian government's attitude to the new path taken in Egypt, with Prime Minister Renzi being one of the first European leaders to give support to President Sisi, creates improved dialogue with Cairo, increasingly pronounced in its influence in Libya. All this in light of the fact that, thanks to its role in international diplomacy, Italy could have the strength to also engage Qatar in a diplomatic process. Qatar is currently firmly supporting the Libyan Islamists, as opposed to the secular forces, which receive aid from the Emirates and Egypt. The involvement of Doha in the search for a compromise to stabilise Libya seems inevitable at this time because of the role played by the Qatari authorities and the need to find a compromise, or at least some common points among all the actors in Libya. In this context, the role of Italy as a negotiator could be crucial with possible positive effects for the future.

The development of a common agenda should also be pursued by pressurising and lobbying within the United Nations, the only international institution that can bestow the necessary legal and political legitimacy to undertake more effective action in Libya. In

this sense, 2015 could be the year in which the UN will begin to consider the possibility of a humanitarian or stabilising mission. However, the operational risks of such an eventuality should be stressed. In fact, the Derna militias, who are heavily armed thanks to the black market and the looting of the Gheddafian arsenals, are ready to face the arrival of a conventional military force, against which they may be able to maximise their asymmetric techniques (attacks, improvised explosives, guerrilla ambushes). Therefore, a hypothetical military commitment must necessarily take into account the possible heavy human, economic and political costs.

Of course, as mentioned earlier, no action involving the use of force can be conceived without a clear political strategy and a road map for national dialogue. Despite the ill-concealed sympathies of a part of the international community and of many European chancelleries for General Haftar and for the Tobruk government, a process of internationally recognised Libyan political dialogue is inconceivable if it does not include representatives of the two parliaments, the moderate militia leaders and the tribal leaders from the south of the country, especially those belonging to the Tuareg and Toubou groups, who are indispensable in bringing peace to the central and southern regions of the country. In this sense, the involvement of the tribes and local authorities is essential, since it would deprive the jihadist network linked to

the Islamic State of the social support that is fundamental for conducting its operations. In this sense, the international community could take inspiration from the strategy of forming Awakening Councils that was used in Iraq in 2005. On that occasion, General Petraeus, commander of the multinational coalition in Iraq, had the inspired idea of favouring the formation of a network of Sunni militias, allied to the Western forces, to oppose al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Moreover, we must never forget that Haftar himself, although he can count on the support of Egypt, is not a figure with the power and influence needed to unify the anti-jihadist front. In his political plan, which could be to become the new strongman of Libya, defeating the Islamist militias and the Caliphate of Bayda appears to be indispensable. However, the strong personal vocation that characterises his actions has worsened relations with the Tobruk government, as can be seen by the events in early February. On that occasion, Haftar had issued an ultimatum of 24 hours to the Tobruk politicians, threatening to use force if they had not given him all decision-making powers, “blessing” the formation of a Supreme Military Council chaired by him. The negative response of the Tobruk Parliament shows us the tension that characterises the relationship between the General and the political component, currently supported by a logic of mutual convenience. Indeed, Haftar needs the support of Tobruk to get the political

recognition that would allow him to be acknowledged by the international community as a legitimate interlocutor, while Tobruk needs Haftar's militias to have an armed force.

A law excluded General Haftar from a real return to power: he was an officer of the Libyan Armed Forces until the defeat against Chad in the Aouzou strip in 1987, before being forced into exile in the United States. This greater legitimacy on a political level could allow Haftar to reintegrate other members of the old regime, an alliance which would form a stronger anti-Islamic front. By assuming the power legally, Haftar could present himself as a legitimate interlocutor for the entire country, convincing foreign powers to support him explicitly, even on the basis of his commitment in the field against the jihadi militias.

These analyses and perspectives tend to categorically exclude the possibility of a Libyan government in exile that, from some illustrious bases abroad, would try to stabilise the country without having any connection with the forces in the field, hundreds of miles away. In this sense, the biggest risk is that the same mistake that the Syrian opposition made with Assad could be repeated, when he was recognised as "the true voice of the free people", but confined to a nondescript office in Turkey, with no relevant political weight.

Finally, focusing on the jihadist risk and the situation in Derna, a possible agreement with

the Tuareg and Toubou communities would deprive the militias linked to the IS of tribal support, both in terms of militia and in terms of the exploitation of the criminal and financial network linked to trafficking, which constitutes the backbone of all the hostile national initiatives.