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Islamic State' Pretence and the Upcoming Wars in Libya

By Ramzy Baroud
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Another war is in the making in Libya: the questions are 'how' and 'when'? While the prospect of another military showdown is unlikely to deliver Libya from its current security upheaval and political conflict, it is likely to change the very nature of conflict in that rich, but divided, Arab country.

An important pre-requisite to war is to locate an enemy or, if needed, invent one. The so-called 'Islamic State' (IS), although hardly an important component in the country's divisive politics, is likely to be that antagonist.

Libya is currently split, politically, between two governments, and, geographically, among many armies, militias, tribes and mercenaries. It is a failed state par excellence, although such a designation does not do justice to the complexity of the Libyan case, together with the root causes of that failure.

Now that 'IS' has practically taken over the city of Sirte, once a stronghold for former Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi, and the bastion of al-Qadhafi tribe, the scene is becoming murkier than ever before. Conventional wisdom has it that the advent of the opportunistic, bloodthirsty group is a natural event considering the security vacuum resulting from political and military disputes. But there is more to the story.

Several major events led to the current stalemate and utter chaos in Libya. One was the military intervention by NATO, which was promoted, then, as a way to support Libyans in their uprising against long-time leader, Gaddafi. NATO's intentional misreading of UN resolution 1973, resulted in 'Operation Unified Protector', which overthrew Gaddafi, killed thousands and entrusted the country into the hands of numerous militias that were, at the time, referred to collectively as the 'rebels'.

The urgency which NATO assigned to its war – the aim of which was, supposedly, to prevent a possible 'genocide' – kept many in the media either supportive or quiet. Few dared to speak out:

“While NATO's UN mandate was to protect civilians, the alliance, in practice, turned that mission on its head. Throwing its weight behind one side in a civil war to oust Gaddafi's regime, it became the air force for the rebel militias on the ground,” wrote Seumas Milne in the Guardian in May 2012.

“So while the death toll was perhaps between 1,000 and 2,000 when NATO intervened in March, by October it was estimated by the NTC (National Transitional Council) to be 30,000 – including thousands of civilians.”

Another important event was the elections. Libyans voted in 2014, yielding a bizarre political reality where two 'governments' claim to be the legitimate representatives of the Libyan people: one in Tobruk and Beida, and the other in Tripoli. Each 'government' has its own military arms, tribal alliances and regional benefactors. Moreover, each is eager to claim a larger share of the country's massive oil wealth and access to ports, thus running its own economy.

The most that these governments managed to achieve, however, is a political and military stalemate, interrupted by major or minor battles and an occasional massacre. That is, until 'IS' appeared on the scene.

The sudden advent of 'IS' was convenient. At first, the 'IS' threat appeared as an exaggerated claim by Libya's Arab neighbours to justify their own military intervention. Then, it was verified by video evidence showing visually-manipulated 'IS' 'giants' slitting the throats of poor Egyptian labourers' at some mysterious beach. Then, with little happening in between, 'IS' fighters began taking over entire towns, prompting calls by Libyan leaders for military intervention.

But the takeover of Sirte by 'IS' cannot be easily explained in so casual a way as a militant group seeking inroads in a politically divided country. That sudden takeover happened within a specific political context that can explain the rise of 'IS' more convincingly.

In May, Libya Dawn's 166th Brigade (affiliated with groups that currently control Tripoli) withdrew from Sirte without much explanation.

“A mystery continues to surround the sudden withdrawal of the brigade,” wrote Kamel Abdallah in al-Ahram Weekly. “Officials have yet to offer an account, in spite of the fact that this action helped 'IS' forces secure an unrivalled grip on the city.”

While Salafi fighters, along with armed members of the al-Qadhahfa tribe, moved to halt the advances of 'IS' (with terrible massacres reported, but not yet verified) both Libyan governments are yet to make any palpable move against 'IS'. Not even the insistent war-enthusiastic, anti-Islamist General Khalifa Hefatar, and his so-called "Libyan National Army" made much of an effort to fight 'IS', which is also expanding in other parts of Libya.

Instead, as 'IS' moves forward and consolidates its grip on Sirte and elsewhere, the Tobruk-based Prime Minister Abdullah Al-Thinni urged "sister Arab nations" to come to Libya's aid and carry out air strikes on Sirte. He has also urged Arab countries to lobby the UN to end its weapons embargo on Libya, which is already saturated with arms that are often delivered illegally from various regional Arab sources.

The Tripoli government is also urging action against 'IS', but both governments, which failed to achieve a political roadmap for unity, still refuse to work together.

The call for Arab intervention in Libya's state of security bedlam is politically-motivated, of course, for Al-Thinni is hoping that the air strikes would empower his forces to widen their control over the country, in addition to strengthening his government's political position in any future UN-mediated agreement.

But another war is being plotted elsewhere, this time involving NATO's usual suspects. The Western scheming, however, is far more involved than Al-Thinni's political designs. The London Times reported on August 1st that "hundreds of British troops are being lined up to go to Libya as part of a major new international mission," which will also include "military personnel from Italy, France, Spain, Germany and the United States ... in an operation that looks set to be activated once the rival warring factions inside Libya agree to form a single government of national unity."

Those involved in the operation which, according to a UK Government source, could be actualized "towards the end of August", are countries with vested economic interests and are the same parties behind the war in Libya in 2011.

Commenting on the report, Jean Shaoul wrote, "Italy, the former colonial power in Libya, is expected to provide the largest contingent of ground troops. France has colonial and commercial ties with Libya's neighbours, Tunisia, Mali and Algeria. Spain retains outposts in northern Morocco and the other major power involved, Germany, is once again seeking to gain access to Africa's resources and markets."

It is becoming clearer that Libya, once a sovereign and relatively wealthy nation, is becoming a mere playground for a massive geopolitical game and large economic interests and ambitions. Sadly, Libyans themselves are the very enablers behind the division of their own country, with Arab and Western powers scheming to ensure a larger share of Libya's economic wealth and strategic value.

The takeover of Sirte by 'IS' is reported as a watershed moment that is, once again, generating war frenzy – similar to that which preceded NATO's military intervention in 2011. Regardless of

whether Arabs bomb Libya, or Western powers do so, the crisis in that country is likely to escalate, if not worsen, as history has amply shown.