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Rome Conference: International Military Operation in Libya Hot on Agenda

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The world attention is focused on the events in Iraq and Syria. Perhaps to lesser extent, it is also focused on Libya – the country where the Islamic State (IS) has strengthened its position in the stronghold of Sirte, a key city in Libya less than 400 miles away from the Italian island of Sicily, which now has become a new focal point for the group. The massive Sirte Basin is the centre of Libya's oil industry. According to the US Department of Energy [report](#), about 80% of Libya's accessible oil is located in the Sirte basin.

Although IS does not control these reserves, the militants are in a prime location to disrupt

production, or to launch an eventual attempt to take control of the resources for themselves. Libya has the potential to become a significant exporter to Europe — something that might end if IS were to move against the country's oil fields. The country provided 11% of Europe's oil needs before the 2011 uprising (for comparison, the figure was 3, 4% in 2014). Over the final months of 2015, IS has attempted to destroy oil pumping stations and other installations in Mabruk, Dahra, Ghani, Bahi and elsewhere. The point, as the International Crisis Group report [notes](#), is not «to seize the fields but to damage the country's economic lifeline in order to weaken the state and allegedly to weaken as well European countries heavily reliant on Libyan oil».



Libya also doesn't have many oil customers outside of Europe. Eighty-five percent of the country's oil was exported to Europe in 2014 while half of its natural gas exports went to Italy alone, according to [an article](#) published by The Wall Street Journal.

IS has threatened to use its location in Libya to disrupt European security and economic well-being.

The group has slowly expanded in Sirte through absorbing jihadists from the al-Qaeda-linked group Ansar al-Sharia. After banding together with local fighters, the group began to rapidly expand its reach out from Sirte and towards the rest of the surrounding region. Approximately 125 miles of territory along the Libyan coast is under de facto IS control. IS's consolidation of territory in Sirte gives the group a foothold in close proximity to Europe — and near a number of potentially fragile neighboring states.

«Libya is the affiliate that we're most worried about», Patrick Prior, the Defense Intelligence Agency's top counterterrorism analyst, has said [according](#) to The New York Times. «It's the hub from which they project across all of North Africa».

True, IS is not a mass movement in Libya, a tribal-based society. The people are largely immune to calls to join a caliphate and set against the continuing arrival of foreign volunteers. The flows of recruits and foreign fighters from Tunisia, Sudan, Yemen and Nigeria are joining the ranks of the group's Libyan branch. IS exploited the internal fighting between rival militias and governments in Libya to seize Sirte in June. Right now the group is trying to expand its zone of

influence to Ajdabiya. The possible loss of Ajdabiya will be a disaster for Libya, cutting off oil ports and the gas fields that generate electricity. The militants' formations are also fighting in some parts of Benghazi and Derna. Tunisia has closed its border with Libya and banned Libyan planes from the capital, fearing suicide attacks.

«The worrisome thing is if ISIS central decides to pivot and pour more resources in, it could be worse», Frederic Wehrey, an analyst at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told the USA Today. Wehrey [said](#) the ISIS militants appear to be pressing south and east of Sirte to control oil facilities in the area.

Patrick Johnston, a counterterrorism analyst at the RAND Corporation, also told the USA Today (Nov.30) that «Libya is probably right now the most significant threat to becoming a full-blown sanctuary» for IS.

As IS faces increased pressure at home, many fighters are reportedly returning to Libya. The group might be preparing to use the Libyan front as a fallback base in case of a defeat in Iraq and Syria. Sirte could become a new base of operations for IS's top officers if the group is ultimately forced out of Syria and Iraq. IS cannot be totally defeated until it is uprooted from its new zones of control in Libya.

The Islamic State group has between 2,000 and 3,000 fighters in Libya and has demonstrated its intention to control more territory in the strategically located North African country — but it is only one player among multiple warring factions, United Nations experts said in a [report](#) made public on Dec.2

The experts monitoring U.N. sanctions against al-Qaida and spinoff groups said in the report to the U.N. Security Council that the Islamic State group is benefiting from its «appeal» and notoriety in Iraq and Syria and poses «an evident short and long-term threat in Libya». The report says there is concern at the spread of the Islamic State group in Libya, given the country's strategic location on the Mediterranean Sea and its use as a transit point in North Africa. More territory would not only enable IS and al-Qaida-linked groups to further influence ongoing conflicts in North Africa and the Sahel but give the extremists a new hub outside the Middle East, they said.

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Alarm bells about militants' expansion in Libya have been ringing all year. In the summer, the European Union high representative, Federica Mogherini, [warned](#): «In Libya, there is the perfect mix ready to explode and in case it explodes, it will explode just at the gates of Europe».

French Defence Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, [told](#) a French magazine this month, «We see foreign jihadists arriving in the region of Sirte who, if our operations in Syria and Iraq succeed in reducing the territorial reach of Isis, could tomorrow be more numerous».

On December 11, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls, called for international efforts to crush Isil to extend to the North African country. «We are at war. We have an enemy that we must

fight and crush in Syria, in Iraq and soon in Libya, too», he [said](#).

In November, the US military [struck Derna](#), to kill a prominent IS commander.

But pinpoint strikes have failed to slow the group's expansion, Along with drones and spy planes, the US has bombers and Marine helicopter-borne units stationed in Spain and Italy. More US drones operate from two bases in Niger, guiding a 3 thousand strong force of French paratroopers (Operation Barkhane) on the southern Libyan border against jihadi convoys passing out of the country.

Britain could launch military action in Libya to prevent IS from establishing a new stronghold along the Mediterranean coast to target Europe. As the Telegraph [reports](#), asked if Libya could be the next target for British military intervention, a government source said: «Things are moving in that direction. We are taking it one step at a time».

British Tornado and Typhoon combat aircraft are within strike range of Libya, as the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle along with a dozen European warships are off the Libyan coast.

«Italy is at work to bring the international community together to make a decisive push» for a political agreement on a unity government in Libya, Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni [said](#) in the Senate.

Russia enjoys an impressive naval presence in the Mediterranean with the capability to launch long-distance cruise missiles to hit land targets.

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On December 16 Libya's rival parliaments will [sign](#) a UN-sponsored agreement on forming a national unity government.

An official of the internationally recognized parliament, Mohammed Choueib, said the deal could be signed in Morocco, which hosted most of a year of talks brokered by UN envoy Leon Bernardino that led to the proposed deal in October. Under the UN-brokered deal, Libya would be governed by a nine-member presidential council comprising a prime minister, five deputy premiers and three senior ministers.

The oil-rich country has had rival administrations since August 2014, when an Islamist-backed militia alliance overran Tripoli, forcing the recognized government to take refuge in the east.

The announcement came right before world leaders were set to gather in Rome on December 13 to try to speed up the formation of a unity government in Libya. The meeting will bring together the representatives of Russia, the US, Britain, China, and France, Germany, Spain as well as Algeria, Chad, Morocco, Niger, Qatar, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

The new national unity government may ask for military involvement to make the operation legal. This is a key condition for launching the operation.

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Former Republican Representative Ron Paul the father of newly elected House Speaker, Senator Rand Paul, [noted](#) in a recent article: «The reason so many are fleeing places like Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, and Iraq is that US and European interventionist foreign policy has left these countries destabilized with no hopes of economic recovery.... Even when they successfully change the regime, as in Iraq, what is left behind is an almost uninhabitable country».

He hit the nail right on the head. This is the time for new approaches. The establishment of Libyan national unity government and the international effort initiated by Italy provide a unique chance to rectify the mistakes of the past and join in an effort to effectively counter the common threat to the survival of all. If the decisions to be taken in accordance with the international law and become a coordinated effort of international coalition, NATO, Russia, Arab states and other actors included, the evil will be defeated. It would be a folly to do lose this chance. The place is Rome and the time is now. The world is keeping fingers crossed in expectation that wisdom will prevail at last.