

# “Europe must now get involved in a very big way”

N°2 – February 2015

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**More than three years after al-Gaddafi was overthrown, Libya has still not returned to some semblance of normality. In many places, the Libyan state exists only on paper. No less than two governments and dozens of rival tribes, all with their own militias and armed to the teeth, are trying to come to power. In the midst of this chaos “IS,” the terrorist organization, has now entered the fray. Evidence of this is provided by the brutal murder of 21 Egyptian Copts, which could trigger off a civil war that will pose a threat to the entire region and to Europe. Mirco Keilberth, an expert on Libya, explains what is going on.**

## How powerful and dangerous is “IS” in Libya?

Since October 2014 (within a space of only four months), the influence of “IS” has spread from Darna, a city on the north-eastern coast of Libya near the border with Egypt to Sirte, the coastal city which is about 900 km further west. This

was the birthplace of al-Gaddafi. Sirte, which is where the massacre of the Egyptian Copts took place, was overrun by Libyan jihadists who had returned from the war in Syria and in Iraq. They received support from other Islamist groups such as Ansar al-Sharia.

There is now a closely woven network between North Africa, Syria, and Iraq, and it promotes the struggle of “IS” against the Syrian “President” Bashar al-Assad with fighters and weapons smuggled in from Libya. Conversely, the conquest of Libya and spread of the “IS” caliphate is in the hands of veterans of the war in Syria.

The radical Islamists have been preparing for this moment for three years. They are now making use of strategies, which were tried and tested in Syria. They require allegiance, and in return offer protection against the consequences of the collapse of the Libyan state, and in particular against the gangs of young criminals, which are a growing problem. They provide

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support for the poor. For example, the Islamist militia Ansar al-Sharia has paid for poor families to have medical treatment abroad, and has taken over security at the city's central hospital.

The progress of the war in Syria shows that as a result of its brutality and its unabashed craving for power, the "IS" leaves people with little choice. If the Libyans in the areas overrun by the "IS" wish to survive, they will have to submit to the "IS" or their allies. It is thus to be expected that more and more militias will join the "IS," which means that its fighting power will increase. The helpless perplexity of the West merely reinforces this state of affairs. Whilst Western experts were still talking about whether or not moderate revolutionaries from Misrata were fighting together with the Islamists of Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte, the "IS" presented them with a fait accompli by murdering the Egyptian guest workers. Christians and Misrata rebels have been given an ultimatum to leave Sirte, though it is still unclear how the strong and well-armed Misrata militias will react. The same scenario is about to unfold in the towns of the Saharan province of Fezzan. Here Ahmed Jamous, an Islamist who comes from Tchad, is using similar tactics to persuade the Arab tribes in the region to join "IS."

If the current Libyan government cannot agree to a compromise with the self-appointed counter-government and secure Western support, the "IS" could soon be in control of the lucrative smuggling routes through the Sahara used by human traffickers. If this happens and migration and terrorism become intermingled, Europe will have a very difficult situation on its hands.

### What does this extension of the influence of the Islamic State mean for the region as a whole?

Since 2012 many young volunteers from

adjoining countries and from Europe have attended Libyan training camps.

They were recruited for the fighting in Syria. However, ever since retired Libyan general Khalifa Haftar has started to move against the Islamists in Benghazi, more and more volunteers who have become jihadists are returning, partly in order to carry out attacks in their countries of origin, as the numerous revelations of terrorist cells in southern Tunisia in recent weeks demonstrate.

In Sirte, al-Gaddafi's birthplace, the "IS" has now set up a professional media unit which, with the video that showed the murder of the Egyptian Copts, has supplied the propaganda prelude for an expansion of its territory. Its primary goal is to expand by spreading fear and the prospect of terror.

In moderate circles throughout the region there are unspoken anxieties about being targeted by the extremists.

One should not confuse the martial style of the films with religious zeal or bigotry. The open dissemination of brutal deeds serves a specific purpose, which is to control the population in the occupied cities with a relatively small number of fighters. Furthermore, for the volunteers, including the many Europeans, the barbaric murders mark a point of no return.

The economic situation in Algeria has been exacerbated by the low oil price, and high youth unemployment in Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt plays into the hands of the extremists. The new government in Tunis urgently needs help for its programmes designed to reintegrate Syria returnees, who currently all end up in prison, and that is the breeding ground for religious extremism par excellence.

### What role does Egypt play, which is now taking revenge for the terrorist attack on its citizens and conducting air strikes on "IS" targets in Libya?

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For Egypt the presence of the extremists in Daran is a real threat. No country would accept such training camps and a whole city in the hands of al-Qaida or "IS" in the vicinity of its borders.

For this reason European criticism of the arms build-up by General Chalifa Haftar is completely misguided, that is, as long as people are prepared to sit back and watch the destruction of the Libyan state by extremists without doing anything about it, as has been the case in the last three years.

The Egyptian air strikes seem to have been very effective; six of the ten camps near Darna have been destroyed. With support from the United Arab Emirates, Egypt will continue to supply arms to the Libyan army, and authorize special forces operations as long as Qatar and Turkey support the other side, that is, the Fajr alliance.

The response will be bomb attacks such as the one in El Gubba in the east of Libya. This circle of violence can be stopped only if interference by the Gulf States and Turkey ceases.

The "IS" and the Fajr alliance are making adroit use of the fear of a foreign invasion that has been hammered into the Libyans for 42 years. Egypt and General Haftar should promise the Misrata militias that they will stay away from the west of Libya; in order to protect themselves they have entered into a loose alliance with the extremists.

### What impact does all this have on the security of Europe?

The "IS" is a transnational movement and attaches little importance to international borders. It is far more interested in networking and in integrating or recruiting other groups. There are many Europeans in their ranks, and in Libya they team up with Tunisians or Algerians to form terrorist cells. They are linked with like-minded individuals in Europe via Twitter or Facebook. The presence of Boko Haram in the north of Niger and of "IS" in the Sahara means

terrorist cells can easily reach the Mediterranean.

Commando units with inflatable boats could be in Italy within a matter of hours. They could also use the existing smuggling structures. For a caliphate stretching from Benghazi to Mali, Libya would be both a cash dispenser and a filling station.

It is impossible to conduct a political dialogue with forces like "IS". However, if the dialogue between the warring Libyan factions comes to grief, there is a great danger that more moderate forces such as those in Misrata will no longer be able to distance themselves from the extremists.

Currently the idea that a terrorist commando unit will set its sights on Italy still seems rather remote. However, "IS" terrorists could respond to further military setbacks in Syria and Iraq with an attack on Mediterranean cruise ships. The distance between Darna and Crete is 340 kilometres, and the shipping lane leading to the Suez Canal hugs the Libyan coast.

Europe and Libya's neighbours should discuss the question of "IS" returnees at a regional conference. A meeting devoted to Libya should in any case be convened in the course of the year.

### Are the Europeans (EU/NATO) actually capable of ending the civil war in Libya, and supporting the reconstruction of the Libyan state? If the answer is yes, what strategy should the Europeans and the US adopt?

After the death of Muammar al-Gaddafi the few state structures already in existence managed to survive. However, the officials, who for years had taken their cue from nepotism and systemic allegiance, did not dare to take any decisions. Furthermore, incompetence and the "Political Isolation Law", which places an employment ban on officials, politicians and leading cadre groups in the army and the intelligence services (when all is said and done about eight percent of the

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Libyan population), make it impossible to use the large sums of money available for disarmament and the creation of employment opportunities. The Islamists for their part have purchased weapons from citizens with the money paid out by the Ministry of Defence.

In 2012 the government “Warriors Affairs Commission,” to name but one example, had at its disposal more than €250 million for the retraining of former fighters. However, internal disagreements are the reason why many good ideas have come to nothing. Now two governments and parliaments are vying for power. Karama is supported by the army, Fajr in western Libya by militias.

As a result of the polarization between the “Karama” and “Fajr” alliances, which are themselves showing signs of strain and internal dissent, the system has totally collapsed.

Thus it is all the more important not to overlook the fact that Libya still functions on the local level, where social responsibility is exercised by family and tribal structures.

Europe should help this local level to establish administrative and security structures, initially and if necessary from outside Libya.

The centralism of someone like Muammar al-Gaddafi is a thing of the past.

Libya achieved independence as a federation of three provinces. Unfortunately international diplomacy and projects in recent years have been confined to Tripoli. In Benghazi and Sebha many people have found this rather disappointing. The extremists have moved in to fill the vacuum.

The crisis in Libya, and in Mali, Congo and now Niger, has led people to change their minds and should mark the start of a new phase of local involvement by European policymakers. For example, only functioning community structures which can provide young men with an alternative to smuggling and the militias will be

able to assume responsibility for border controls in south Libya. A unit trained by the EU in Tripoli, which does not have any regional connections, will only lead to new conflicts.

Even if there are not many reliable partners in a particular area, one needs to get in touch with them and to train them to perform border control duties together with fighters from adjoining states.

The “peace negotiations” are currently the responsibility of UN Special Representative Bernardino León, who in Tunis has at his disposal a staff of two. The EU border mission in Libya has to all intents and purposes been terminated.

Europe has displayed a great deal of ignorance about the situation in Libya, and that is rather dangerous.

In Libya there are still residual amounts of the substances that are needed to build chemical weapons. There are shoulder-launched SAMs and a research reactor in Tripoli.

Europe has no choice. It must now get involved in a very big

### What can the African Union do?

Of course, the African Union (AU) was al-Gaddafi’s brainchild and is rejected by the revolutionaries, since it adopted a critical stance towards the uprising.

That the Islamic State is now meeting in the Ouagadougou Congress Centre in Sirte, where the idea of the AU was born in 1999, illustrates the extent of the power vacuum, and the determination with which the terror organization “IS” is filling it.

The African Union and the EU should actually be developing solutions for the issues of migration and cross-border smuggling.

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The fact is that religious extremism and the migration issue in North Africa are increasingly tied up with what is happening in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Libyan oil is important for the European energy market. How does crude oil fit into this conflict? Who controls the oilfields? Who gets the revenues? How can the West exercise its influence in this area?**

Libya has the largest oil reserves in Africa, and large oil reserves remain to be discovered in the southwest of the Libyan Sahara Desert.

Furthermore, large areas of the Libyan Sahara Desert are flat, suitable for motorized traffic and possess a good infrastructure. But the prosperity of its five million inhabitants is in danger. The fact is that time is running out for Libya. As a result of the current chaos even oil companies that were in it for the long haul are moving out.

A number of European refineries are technically equipped to process Libya's high-grade "Brent" crude, and are toying with the idea of shifting to other supplier countries, which would involve large investments and represent a long-term decision. Without foreign workers and engineers the electricity and water supplies are also potentially at risk.

In the final analysis the issue in this conflict is access to power and money, which are almost exclusively based on the immense oil and gas reserves. In the past Libyan communities were not in a position to take political decisions, but today they want to have a share of the wealth in their vicinity. Exaggerated expectations of this kind are the reason why some of them have occupied oilfields and blocked pipelines.

These days many Libyans quote a well-known comment by their former King Idris, who is supposed to have said to the Texan drilling specialists after the discovery of the first oil reserves: "I wish you had found water. Water creates work. Oil enables people to have dreams."

The West should be prepared to provide robust support for the resumption of oil production after a stabilization of the situation. In Cyrenaica that could soon be the case. Then the oil specialists must return. They will have to be protected, and there is clearly a need for efficient foreign-trained security forces.

**What are the prospects for the months ahead?**

Playing for time is no longer an option. The chaos is playing into the hands of the extremists.

The agreement to freeze the conflict in the West of the country and to exchange prisoners, which was reached last week between the rival militias of the towns of Sirtan and Misrata, shows that local agreements can be the basis for national agreements.

At the same time the world community should identify and prosecute war criminals and extremists. In order to make this point, there is no need for complicated trials at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

In the final analysis the announcement by the United Nations that it intended to impose sanctions on militia leaders led to the peace negotiations in Geneva. However, the effect was negligible, since the announcement was not the prelude for resolute action. Many radicals, such as Grand Mufti Sadiq al-Ghariani, who has openly issued calls for a jihad against the Libyan army, often visit Europe, which they find rather agreeable. Sweeping entry bans would be an initial and uncomplicated step in the right direction, as would the prospect of large-scale structural assistance in the event of a peace treaty. The alternative is a kind of Somalia on the Mediterranean.

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### Biographical information

Mirco Keilberth has been a free-lance reporter in Libya for four years.

### The interviewer was

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