

Libya Under Three Governments



Tripoli citizens demonstrate to show support of the ongoing peace dialogue between Libya's warring factions held in Morocco, in Martyrs Square, Tripoli, Libya, on 6 March 2015. Photo Cobris

Faiz Sarraj, Libya's prime minister appointed by those participating in the [Skhirat](#) Libya dialogue with pressures from the international community and the UN, reached Tripoli on 31 March 2016. His [Government of National Accord](#) (GNA), the result of two-year-long UN-led negotiations, was [announced](#) in October 2015. UN officials stated it would be "a matter of weeks" before the GNA would be settled in Tripoli: yet it took almost six months with a perilous journey and uncertain control of the situation on the ground. As the [General National Congress](#) (GNC) government in Tripoli and the Tobruk government ([House of Representatives](#)) remain, Sarraj's GNA is Libya's de facto third government.

While Libyan politicians fight for their personal interests, the interests of their political parties and

sometimes of their proxy patrons in the Arab Gulf, the country is disintegrating. Libya is becoming a mosaic of stateless regions, city-states, and tribe-controlled areas. The country is also a base for the smuggling of weapons and human beings, narcotic traffickers, and other outlaws.

More worrying, especially to the international community, is the advance of the extremist **Islamic State** (IS). Firmly **established** in Sirte since mid-2015, the jihadists of the proto-state or “caliphate” covet all of Libya, as well as **Tunisia** and the surrounding regions. Though they are unable to hold on to their former stronghold of Derna, eastern Libya, IS fighters managed to capture the strategic city of Sirte, the hometown of Libya’s former leader **Gaddafi**, and they remain there.

From Sirte, IS has sent suicide bombers to Tobruk, Misrata, and Tripoli, and it is forging ties with groups of extremists in the strategically important western city of Sabratha, located between Tripoli and Tunisia and the location of a UNESCO **World Heritage site**. Affiliated with Tripoli’s pro-Islamist GNC government the municipality of Sabratha agreed, willingly or unwillingly, to turn a blind eye to the IS fighters.

The failed state of Libya has also become a safe haven for **Tunisian radicals**. Tunisians are accustomed to go to Libya to find work, and tens of thousands live there. Since the **overthrow** of Gaddafi’s regime and the start of the **war in Syria** in 2011, many Tunisians have moved to Libya as a stepping-stone, in order to join the war in Syria. Since 2014, increasing numbers of Tunisians have remained in Libya joining radical Islamist militias, either to fight on Libyan soil or to be trained and acquire the weapons they need to **take the war back** home to Tunisia.

Tunisian authorities **claim** that the three major terrorist attacks the country suffered in 2015— on the **Bardo Museum**, hotel-served beaches in **Sousse**, and Presidential Guard buses—were all carried out by “returnees” – Tunisians who had been trained in Libya. Unsurprisingly, when a group of presumed IS affiliates attacked the city of Ben Guerdane on 7 March 2016, a Libyan connection was quickly uncovered.

Libya is not only a danger to tiny Tunisia but is also spreading fear among Algerians and Egyptians and is a threat to Europe. For the European Union, Libya, once attractive for its abundance of **natural resources**, is now a major concern because of the possibility of attacks on European ships or coastal cities, the risk of infiltration into the continent’s countries, and the prospect of massive waves of refugees—**Arabs and Africans alike**—making their way through Libya to the south of Europe and beyond. These threats are causing alarm bells to ring in Brussels and Strasbourg.

Through its **UNSMIL** mission led by **Martin Kobler**, the United Nations has been holding talks involving local and foreign actors with interests in Libya. The UN-backed GNA finally made it to Tripoli, having used Tunisia as a base for the preceding six months. The government returned to Libya by sea, using a boat after the Tripoli authorities prohibited its plane from landing. Its legitimacy is still questioned by many Libyan factions, not least the GNC and Tobruk government.

The situation has pushed the international community to consider a Plan B. Military intervention has always been on the table, but cooperation is problematic because the various protagonists do not have the same interests.

On several occasions in 2014 and 2015, **Egypt** and the **United Arab Emirates**, in their fight against political and radical Islam and fearing the spread of chaos (or democracy), sent their fighter jets to bomb targets in Libya.

A number of western countries —mainly America, France, United Kingdom, and Italy—have been conducting regular surveillance missions since 2015 and threatened to **take additional action** if no

solution was reached. A few strikes, conducted by American and French jets, targeted al-Qaeda and IS positions in Libya. By the end of February 2016, American jets had **killed about 50 Tunisian** IS fighters in Sabratha, and it is thought that these actions may have prompted the Ben Guerdane attack.

Libya's nearest neighbors—Tunisia and **Algeria**—are opposed to military action, considering it a destabilizing factor. They fear it would push the criminal and terrorist networks gathered in Libya to seek refuge or even revenge in their countries.

Libyan citizens see no improvement on the ground and feel only despair. The international community appears to be waiting for the GNA to settle in Tripoli before undertaking any organized action, although this seems to be more a device for gaining time than a realistic expectation. In fact, Libya mirrors a divided international community that is unable to agree on fundamentals such as the fight against terror and the security of human beings.