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## LIBYA: intervention, indifference and interference

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The videos made by Islamic State have the undoubted potential to affect international policy. Designed to fan the flames of the conflict, they have been achieving this in Syria and Iraq for months and it is now Libya's turn. Neither the choice of the victims nor the location is accidental. Beheading 21 Egyptian Christians on the beaches of Tripolitania, a few hundred kilometres from the Italian coast, is clearly meant to escalate and internationalise the conflict. Judging by initial reactions, the strategy is working, with Egypt bombing a number of targets in Derna and Sirte and talk beginning of an international intervention under a UN Security Council (UNSC) mandate.

There was already speculation about this possibility when the Italian Prime Minister, **Matteo Renzi**, warned that we should "not swing from total indifference to hysteria". Soon afterwards, **a joint statement** published by France, Italy, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States made no reference to a military operation and highlighted the importance of finding a political solution to the Libyan conflict because of the way it allowed groups such as Islamic State to strengthen. This, and other examples of caution, had some effect on the emergency session of the UNSC held on February 17th and **Egypt withdrew its proposal for a military operation**. Nevertheless, the Coptic hostage crisis shows that there are actors (Egypt is the most visible, but there are others) who are prepared to embark on a military intervention and that Islamic State wants to push them to do so.

Repeated tense situations are likely to arise from new provocations in the form of terrorist videos and activities and it is likely that the option of military intervention will once again be put on the table. For this reason, it is more important than ever to understand what went wrong in the last military intervention, to determine whether it is true, as the Italian premier says, that until now the reaction has been one of indifference, and to understand the risks of a strategy of interference, understood as support for one of the sides in the conflict.

The international intervention that ended the Gaddafi regime was based on **resolution 1973**, adopted by the UNSC on March 17th, 2011. Invoking the principle of the responsibility to protect (R2P), NATO conducted an operation with the participation of three Arab countries: Qatar, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates.

This resolution was preceded by resolutions from the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council, who urged the establishment of a no-fly zone. This intervention has been subject to two criticisms that are not mutually exclusive. The first maintains that the original mandate was perverted in order to turn it into a regime change operation. The second argues that if the objective was to protect civilians the operation should not have concluded with the fall of Gaddafi and ought to have been prolonged, even if by other means. In this sense, what stands out is an inability to seriously address the goal of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration as well as the process of national reconciliation. Why is this? Because of the pride of the new Libyan leaders, who refused to be lectured. Because a light operation such as that initiated by the United Nations was all that they were prepared to accept. And also because of a lack of coordination between the international partners, with each pursuing opportunities for bilateral cooperation with the new authorities at the expense of a shared strategy. In addition, some pieces of good news, like the extremely high level of participation and reasonable normality of the first elections in 2012, contributed to the illusion that Libya could consolidate its transition without too many hitches.

What was to follow soon buried this fleeting optimism. Today Tripoli and Benghazi are battlefields, Islamist groups such as the one controlling the city of Derna have sworn loyalty to the Islamic State organisation and areas of the country (especially in the east and the south) are beyond government control. And there is more than one government. In fact, two parallel structures exist. One, led by Omar al-Hasi, with its headquarters in Tripoli, is supported by revolutionary groups, by the powerful Misrata militias and by Islamists under various banners. The other, based in Tobruk, is internationally recognised, has Abdullah al-Thinni as its president, has grown strong in the east of the country, counts sections of the old regime among its supporters and in the west of the country has the backing of the Zintan militias. On the battlefield, two distinct alliances operate: Dignity, led by **Khalifa Haftar**, is aligned with the Tobruk government and says that its main objective is to eradicate Islamist forces; while the rival alliance, *Libya Dawn (Fajr Libia)*, is labelled Islamist by its detractors and a bulwark of the revolution by its supporters.

But let's go back to what Matteo Renzi said. Have we been indifferent to the deterioration? His assertion has much to do with the fact that, due to the crisis in Ukraine, a great deal of European attention has moved east. Only Italy, Malta and, to a certain extent, Spain have acted in recent months as if Libya posed a fundamental threat to European security. But more than indifference, we should speak of Europeans overwhelmed by the accumulation of the crisis and paralysed by the complexity of the actors and the speed with which events precipitate. Europe's leaders have trouble deciphering the situation in Libya and see a minefield that, once entered, they are likely to leave wounded.

Other actors have stepped forward. Most prominent is Egypt, which has been immersed for months in a diplomatic battle for the al-Thinni government to be recognised as the only legitimate interlocutor. Egypt and the United Arab Emirates were behind the bombing of Islamist targets in the battle for Tripoli in August 2014 and Cairo accuses two powerful regional actors—Turkey and Qatar—of supporting the Tripoli government because of ideological connections with the Muslim Brotherhood. So, added to the existing, already-complex conflict between militias, tribal factions and territorial and ideological sensibilities must be added the confrontation between regional powers attempting to consolidate their influence or (and this is the same thing) to limit that of their rivals.

For now, a military intervention in Libya has been ruled out, but indifference or, better said, paralysis is not a viable alternative. Action must be taken to ensure the success of the conversations between the various Libyan factions which are

to be led by Bernardino León, the Spanish diplomat who, after his involvement with Libya on behalf of the EU, now heads the [United Nations Mission to Libya](#) (UNSMIL). This process should culminate in the creation of a national unity government. One of the questions that now presents itself is whether the presence of Islamic State in Libya could help the main actors to find common ground.

It is only in support of this future national unity government that there is any sense in a peacekeeping operation under a UN mandate with the involvement of regional actors and a possible military component. The goal of such an intervention should not be to take sides but to support the future unity government as much in reconciliation efforts as in the fight against the terrorist organisations that have installed themselves in Libya, to avoid the country becoming a platform for criminal groups who threaten not only the safety of Libyans but also of their neighbours, to adequately protect civilians and to take the goals of disarmament, demobilisation and the reintegration of the militias seriously.

Further, before taking any decision on what to do in Libya from now on, it would be a good idea for all the actors involved (including those who, like Egypt, have opted for a policy of interference) to ask themselves what Islamic State wants. The Egyptian hostage crisis clearly shows that the organisation seeks to boycott political agreement and to pull as many actors as possible into the conflict. It would be a grave error to give them satisfaction.