

AU/ACSC/XXXXX, AY17

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

COMBATING ISIS & SECURING THE PEACE IN LIBYA

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A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF OPERATIONAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

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Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

April 2017

* The last name of the author has been redacted for operational security reasons. As of 2016, the Islamic State has deliberately targeted U.S. military personnel, using names and publicly available information, particularly those who have spoken critically of the organization or offered public suggestions of how to defeat the terror organization. As such, the author's last name has been redacted.

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Combating ISIS & Securing the Peace in Libya

Abstract

In the United States, events in Libya have been overshadowed in the media by the fighting in Iraq and Syria, ISIS inspired or operated terrorist attacks in Europe and the US, and the presidential election. It probably came as a surprise to many Americans when President Obama revealed that the aftermath following intervention in Libya was the worst mistake of his eight years in office. Appropriately, in his last authorization of a military strike, Libya was again brought to the forefront when the president ordered a massive airstrike by stealth bombers on ISIS targets in the country. Libya will continue to punctuate our foreign policy landscape for some time, as the new administration has called for the eradication of ISIS where just months ago the group controlled a strategic foothold. Additionally, the same conditions favorable to ISIS have turned Libya into the main conduit for migrants and refugees fleeing Africa by boat causing a crisis for our allies in Europe. The international intervention in 2011 seems a failure—in terms of stability and the proliferation of violent extremist ideology. Russia has taken the opposite approach in Syria, intervening to protect an authoritarian regime from collapse—at the tragic humanitarian expense of the Syrian people. While ISIS has recently been severely setback in Libya, counterterrorism without political solutions can only buy limited time for governance to fill the void. This essay provides background and insight into the events in Libya to inform readers of the counterterrorism operations, what is working against the group, and the prospects and challenges confronting Libya's efforts for stability and democratic governance.

Combating ISIS & Securing the Peace in Libya

Instability in Libya has allowed ISIS to step into the power vacuum, establish its own form of governance, and impose its perverted version of Islam, in similar fashion to its rule in Raqqa, Syria and Mosul, Iraq. While the group has been recently routed from the coastal city of Sirte, and appears to be in “survival mode”, the political future of the country, its ability to provide security, governance, and stability, depend upon the sustainability of the recent military gains against ISIS. Therefore, Libya undoubtedly will continue to play an important role in the new administration’s stated global campaign to eliminate the organization. Additionally, our western allies in Europe face an even greater number of threats stemming from Libya from both ISIS and the overwhelming flow of migrants and refugees embarking from Libyan shores for Europe. This essay provides an understanding of the situation in Libya, beginning with a summary of historical context, to the tumultuous events of the present, and offers insights into what the US and international community should consider moving forward in the fight against ISIS and in stabilizing the country.

Why Libya matters?

In April of 2016, when Fox News reporter Chris Wallace asked President Obama to identify his worst mistake during his presidency, the President responded, “failing to plan for the day after, what I think was the right thing to do, in intervening in Libya.”¹ Then in his final days in office, as his last authorization of military action, President Obama authorized massive airstrikes against ISIS targets in Libya killing more than 80 militants. Two days later, on January 20th, as the next president took up the mantle against ISIS, in his inaugural speech President Trump pledged to “unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the Earth.”² In Libya, at its height in 2016, ISIS claimed

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territory that stretched roughly 120 miles centered on the coastal city of Sirte.³ The ISIS expansion to Libya was the result of a similar pattern of violent extremist organizations (VEOs) expansion into lawless and ungoverned spaces where vulnerable populations could be complicit, exploited, and controlled. While ISIS has sought an ever greater presence in Libya, many desperate refugees from Libya and across Africa have sought to flee to Europe, escaping the many abysmal conditions of their respective communities.

Desperate migrants from various parts of the African continent exploit the ungoverned areas and porous borders of Libya created as a result of the civil war. Our European allies face a crisis due to this mass migration and refugee flow from Africa and the Middle East. The swelling flow of migrants crossing the Mediterranean creates increasing social and economic pressure on all European states. Therefore, aiding Libyan efforts to regain domestic stability can help stem the flow of migrants and refugees using Libya as their point of departure.

Embarkation from Libya accounts for the largest portion of illegal crossing via the Central Mediterranean route. In 2012, roughly 60,000 people crossed the Mediterranean illegally, and by 2014 the number had increased to 170,000.⁴ Crossings from Libya to Italy last year resulted in 5,000 deaths, out of a record 181,000 people risking the sea crossing that year.⁵ Stemming the flow of migrants and refugees using Libya as their point of departure requires stabilizing Libya. In addition to imposing severe stress on Europe's economic and social systems, this influx of migrants makes Europe vulnerable to ISIS operative infiltration under the guise of refugee movement.

Libya's proximity just 290 miles away, makes it in much closer proximity to Europe than the ISIS strongholds of Raqqa or Mosul. This nearness also allows radicalized Muslims from Europe to more easily train and fight with ISIS in Libya. Compared to the US, Europe has been

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suffering the brunt of attacks by Muslim members of their populations who became radicalized and went to the Middle East and North Africa to train and fight with ISIS. On 13 November 2015, 130 civilians were killed and 368 were injured when militants launched a series of coordinated attacks in Paris. The attackers belonged to an ISIS cell from Belgium, most of whom held French or Belgium citizenship, some however, had infiltrated into Europe as migrants from Syria.⁶ In December of 2016, a Tunisian who had made the Mediterranean crossing in a raft in 2011, drove a truck into a crowded Christmas market, killing 12 in Berlin.⁷

ISIS continues its efforts to radicalize disenchanted Muslims worldwide, and encourages them to carry out lethal attacks in their adopted homelands.⁸ The group seeks to inspire individuals to commit acts of terrorism in support of the broader ISIS struggle against its rather lengthy list of declared enemies. In the US, a husband and wife, supporters of ISIS killed 14 people at a social services center in San Bernardino, California in December 2015.⁹ Then in June of 2016, after declaring allegiance to the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Omar Mateen killed 49 people and wounded 53 others in an attack on an Orlando nightclub.¹⁰ In Libya, just as in Iraq and Syria, ISIS found a safe haven for a time amidst the power vacuum and chaos. As a result of Libya's ongoing civil war, ISIS has created a base from which to export its cancerous perverted ideology to vulnerable, would-be, lone-wolf attackers globally.

Understanding ISIS

ISIS's "primary strategic target is the consolidation and expansion of the lands and authority of the Islamic State."¹¹ At its peak strength, ISIS controlled a sectarian army numbering over thirty thousand local, foreign recruited, or aligned combatants in Iraq and Syria.¹² In 2015 ISIS began to expand its influence and territorial claims to Libya. As the organization began experiencing territorial losses in Iraq and Syria, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-

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Baghdadi, began dispatching scores of his lieutenants to Libya as a rearguard base.¹³ In a February 2016 BBC interview with a top Libyan intelligence official, the head of Intelligence in Misrata, Mr. Ismail Shukri, referring to ISIS stated that “they view Libya as a safe haven...Some of their members, especially those with long-term importance to IS, are taking refuge here.”¹⁴ In addition to a fallback option, the group saw Libya as offering a fertile ground for expansion into North Africa, and economic opportunity in the sale of Libyan oil.

According to Fawaz Gerges, author of a recent work on ISIS, the group threatens the security and stability of Arab states in large part due more to the fragility of many Arab state systems rather than the organization’s own strength as a strategic actor.¹⁵ This was certainly the case in Libya under Muammar Gaddafi. The failure of Arab states, and the same perceived injustices that fueled the Arab Spring, have fed the rise of groups such as ISIS. ISIS has exploited these grievances of tyranny, widespread corruption, bleak economic and social conditions, and offered a subversive alternative.¹⁶ ISIS claims to have a socioeconomic alternative ideology—which incorporates the rules and laws of seventh-century Arabia—that can rival the ideology of Western modernity.¹⁷

ISIS’s doctrine, disseminated through three primary manifestos, espouses the efficacy of savage violence. It directs members to kill with impunity utilizing viciousness and brutality. A principle tenant of the doctrine claims terrorism as the key to victory, while restraint or mercy would represent weakness and will lead to defeat.¹⁸ One of ISIS’ most well-known doctrinal statements, *The Management of Savagery*, written under the pseudonym Abu Bakr al-Najji, offers a form of military strategy for the organization based on three main stages. The first stage, *al-Nikaya wal-Tamkeen* (vexation and empowerment) draws the vulnerable target’s security forces into combat through carrying out terrorist attacks against vital economic and strategic

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targets, such as oil facilities or tourist areas. By creating a state of “savagery and chaos” the organization can thrive and grow in the security vacuum, exploit the weakness of the state, and overthrow the ‘tyrannical’ leaders. In the second phase, *Idrarat al-Tawhuch* (the administration or management of savagery), the insurgents manage the transition from the old government to the new. Lastly, in the final stage, *Shawkat al-Tamkeen* (empowerment), the Islamic State becomes fully established and fulfills its Sharia duties.¹⁹ Therefore, ISIS’s strategy depends on the first phase, the establishment of chaos and mayhem. Najji instructs “we must drag all the people to battle and bring the temple down on the heads of everyone.”²⁰ The group can only succeed with the complete disintegration of state and social order.²¹ Only after the complete breakdown of a community can ISIS rebuild its society as the Salafi-Jihadist form of an Islamic State. In this third empowerment phase, communities begin to realize they have replaced a repressive regime with brutal religious extremism.

ISIS’s doctrine focuses primarily on the near enemy, meaning the “apostate leaders” of the Arab world. Spectacular attacks against the far enemy while encouraged, facilitated, and enabled, primarily serve to draw attention away from setbacks in the establishment of the Islamic State. The groups claims that every Muslim by the age of fifteen has an “obligation” for jihad against “apostate leaders.” However, it has not yet made facilitating lone-wolf attacks against the far enemy, its *primary* focus.²² However, as ISIS began seeing military losses in 2015 in Iraq and Syria, it began facilitating and inspiring more distant and spectacular attacks to bolster its image, and distract its members and potential recruits from the military setbacks.²³ This pressure on the group in 2015 also increased the strategic importance of Libya for the group. To understand how ISIS was able to establish itself in Libya, we must first appreciate Libya’s historical and political experiences.

Understanding Libya

Libya, a label created by foreign occupiers, has three primary regions: Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan.²⁴ From 1517 until 1911 the Ottomans ruled over the territory that today includes Libya. In 1911, the Italians announced their intentions to annex Cyrenaica and Tripolitania from the Ottoman's, which led to the Turco-Italian war. Following World War I, Libyans found an opportunity to assert self-governance as the war left both the Ottomans and Italians in a state of disarray. Unfortunately, and in many ways similar to their struggles today, Libyan militia infighting prevented them from capitalizing on the opportunity and forming any sort of sustainable national government. The Italians exploited the fractured Libyan opposition and reasserted control by 1920.²⁵ In recapturing Libya, the Italians used brutal force and committed egregious human rights violations under the narrative that force was required to impose order and rule of law. For nearly twenty years, the Italians governed Libya as two separate territories, Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, with their respective capitals of Tripoli and Benghazi, until the late thirties when they consolidated the greater Libya.

In 1943, during the Second World War, allied campaigns pushed the Italians out of North Africa. The British took control of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica while the free French forces took control of Fezzan. Following the conclusion of World War II, Libya's political independence was suddenly thrust upon the collection of tribes in the vast desert expanse as the allies facilitated the creation of a "United Kingdom of Libya" and appointed Idris al-Sanusi of Cyrenaica as the monarch in 1951.²⁶ This lasted until Colonel Muammar Qaddafi took power in a bloodless coup on September 1st 1969.

Gaddafi seized power as part of a coup consisting of young army officers who took control of strategic buildings in the then capital city of Benghazi.²⁷ Following the coup, Gaddafi was

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able to consolidate power around himself and eventually fabricate his own system of government. Gaddafi promoted a method of rule justified by an odd conception of pure democracy and direct rule of the masses. He codified this political system in his multi-volume *Green Book*, completed in 1976, which described the 'collection of republics' in his system known as the Libyan *Jamahiriya*. Gaddafi marketed his *jamahiriya* system of government as a system of popular councils that did not need democratic elections since they were already directly democratic.²⁸ In practice, however, government in Libya under Gaddafi operated nearly the exact opposite of direct democracy. In reality, the Gaddafi regime ruled primarily through a patronage network of select tribal affiliations. He secured support from tribal leaders by giving them access to government positions, lucrative contracts, and access to opportunities for corruption, in order to maintain loyalty and his grip on power.

The Libyan tribes consist among four major ethnic groups. The largest group, the Arabs, live along the north coast of Libya, the most densely populated areas of the country. The Toubou ethnic group lives predominately in the south-central region of the country. The Tuaregs live on the western edge of the country along the border with Algeria, and the Berbers reside in smaller pockets in the northwest near Tripoli.²⁹

Gaddafi system had nationalized virtually the entire economy.³⁰ Libya has the largest proven oil reserves on the African continent, however, throughout the 2000's leading up to the Arab Spring, oil production never passed the level of 1969, when Gaddafi first took power. Government actions, both domestic and foreign, inhibited investment, and use of expertise, preventing the government from effectively capitalizing on its abundant oil reserves.³¹

Libya has a population of around 6.3 million people with nearly 78% of the population concentrated in the two major cities, Tripoli in the west and Benghazi in the east.³² Nearly 97%

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of Libyans follow Sunni Islam. (Nearly 3% of the population remains Christian, and other faiths make less than 1% of the population).³³ In other words, in contrast to other Arab states where ISIS has seized territory, Libya does not suffer from any sectarian rift or friction, such as between Sunnis and Shias. However, the strong historic fault-lines based on its geographic and tribal divisions constitute a barrier to forming a government.³⁴ Geographically speaking, the traditional religious heartland of Libya has been in the northeastern parts of the country near Benghazi and Derna. This however has not prevented violent Islamists groups from forming throughout the country since the end of the Gaddafi regime.

The isolation of Libya through Gaddafi's eccentric rule accelerated throughout the 1980's as Gaddafi funded political factions, guerrilla groups, and terrorists in various areas around the globe. In 1986 the US launched airstrikes against Libya in response to the killing of two US servicemen in the terrorist bombing of a Berlin disco. In December of 1998, Gaddafi sponsored terrorists blew up Pan Am flight 103 over the Scottish town of Lockerbie killing 270 people, including 189 Americans.³⁵ The resulting political and economic sanctions effectively cut off Libya from the outside world, shoring up the influence and control the Gaddafi regime over the Libyan people. The people of Libya remained isolated and repressed until information technology began connecting Libyans to each other and to the outside world, then they began to realize other society's progress and that they were being left behind.

Four decades under Gaddafi rule had left Libya with no modern history of rule-bound political institutions, rule of law, civil society, or democratic political culture.³⁶ The people have no tradition of effective or legitimate state institutions or even of a unifying national identity in Libya. Libyans have a strong preference for local governance, under tribal and regional identities, and a strong mistrust of central authority--stemming from every Libyan historical

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experience thus far. Many factors contribute to this poor national foundation, the most significant being: Libya's geography; traditional tribal organization; Italy's brutal colonial rule; only a brief post-independence monarchy; and most importantly Gaddafi's repressive autocratic regime.³⁷

The Arab Spring

By 2011 Libyans faced a large gap between what they thought their country should look like, and what it actually did look like, between what they thought they should have and what they actually did have.³⁸ Satellite television, smartphones, social media, and information technology allowed Libyans to see how far behind they had fallen compared to other Arab petroleum and natural gas-based economies, namely the GCC states. As the forces of modernity spread, Libyan's perceptions of themselves and expectations began to evolve. Libyans were aware of the country's oil wealth and their expectations did not coincide with the realities of daily life under the Gaddafi regime.³⁹

Libya holds the ninth largest proven oil reserves in the world and the largest in Africa with an estimated 48.36 billion barrels.⁴⁰ A small population of only 6.3 million, would understandably expect a much higher standard of living based on such large resources.⁴¹ But while highly paid celebrity musicians Beyoncé, Mariah Carey, and Usher performed at lavish Gaddafi parties, he left the population seeking a piece of the economic pie.⁴² While the state did provide some generous welfare programs, it failed to modernize the economy and provide jobs for the large youth population.⁴³

On February 17th 2011, six days after the fall of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, protesters in Benghazi and other north-eastern towns such as Derna and Tobruk took to the streets on the anniversary of 2006 protests.⁴⁴ The 2006 protests originated as demonstrations against the

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Italian consulate in Benghazi after an Italian politician commented on cartoons mocking the Prophet Mohamed that appeared in Danish newspapers. These 2011 protests broadened in scope to become demonstrations against the Gaddafi regime and resulted in the death of at least ten protesters at the hands of regime forces.⁴⁵

The February 2011 protests quickly turned into an armed insurgency, and within a week rank-and-file soldiers had either defected or fled the protest areas they were supposed to quell, leaving behind weapons and equipment.⁴⁶ Inspired by events in Tunisia and Egypt, the armed insurgency spread throughout Libya and senior government officials started to defect.⁴⁷ Despite the rash of defections, the disorganized rebel groups were out-gunned and unable to hold off advances of still loyal military brigades, who by March of 2011 were on the verge of re-taking key areas such as Benghazi.⁴⁸ At this point Gaddafi pledged to go from ‘alley to alley, house to house’ to ‘cleanse’ the ‘rats’ and ‘cockroaches,’ in violent, potentially genocidal rhetoric, threatening ‘rivers of blood,’ which quickly got the attention of international community.⁴⁹ Without the inspiration of revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, the Libyan revolution may not have occurred. Certainly, without western intervention events would have unfolded much differently.⁵⁰

Intervention

Western intervention in Libya was informed both by history and current events in Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain. In the latter case, western powers observed from the sidelines as Saudi forces helped the government crush predominately Shia protesters. The Arab world appeared chaotic, which created a new and uncomfortable ambiguity after many decades of “stability” under repressive regimes. US foreign policy up to this point had consistently prioritized stability over the alternative ambiguity in such a volatile region, in the form of

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backing predictable authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa. This policy would put the US in the crosshairs of Al Qaeda and later ISIS, who sought to overthrow US-backed authoritarian regimes of the Arab world. Moreover, the likely fall of Benghazi and the genocidal rhetoric of Qaddafi spurred international leaders' concerns for the possibility of a massive humanitarian catastrophe.

The US administration was conflicted over whether to intervene in Libya. For example, then Defense Secretary Robert Gates, noted "modern military interventions were complex and inevitably had unintended consequences that were difficult to manage."⁵¹ US National Security Advisor Tom Donilon shared Gates' resistance to intervention. On the other side of the argument, US Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice and White House Special Advisor Samantha Power, strongly advocated US intervention. Samantha Power had gained attention for her published condemnation of the US failure to intervene in the 1994 Rwandan genocide.⁵² In the end, President Obama came to side with the interventionists, and on March 28th presented his case to the American people noting that the risks "cannot be an argument for never acting on behalf of what's right."⁵³

Through UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1973, the UN for the first time invoked the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine against the Gaddafi regime, due to the number of European states which decided to act to protect Libyans from the risk of massive civilian casualties.⁵⁴ UNSCR 1973 passed on March 17th, 2011 by a vote of 10 – 0 with five council members abstaining from the vote including Russia and China. The language in the UNSCR remained vague enough to allow broad limits to the intervention. It authorized the international community "to take all necessary measures...to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack".⁵⁵ The very next day, French airstrikes begin outside of Benghazi against

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Gaddafi's loyal forces. Shortly thereafter NATO took charge of the operation, where anything deemed as a threat to civilians became fair game to NATO forces flying overhead. Observers of the conflict quickly concluded that defending civilians would require removing Gaddafi, who had pledged to fight to his last drop of blood in his televised speech to the country.

During the intervention, 14 NATO members and 4 partner countries struck over 6,000 targets in Libya.⁵⁶ The intervention involved more than just aircraft above Libya. Western Special Operations Forces (SOF) worked with rebel groups to identify targets. Press reports said that Qatari SOF started training and assisting rebel groups on the ground as well. The French allegedly airlifted weapons to rebel groups in violation of the UN resolution.

This intervention changed the tide of the conflict, and by the end of August 2011, rebel forces backed by NATO air power and foreign special forces took control of the capital city of Tripoli.⁵⁷ Militia leaders, tribal Sheiks and politicians quickly formed the National Transition Council (NTC) in August. This council included the new military commander, General Khalifa Haftar. The *New York Times* claims that Gen. Haftar was a CIA asset, even after he fell from grace following a Libyan military conflict in neighboring Chad.⁵⁸ Before that, Gen. Haftar had played a role in the rise of Gaddafi's regime following the overthrow of King Idris in 1969.

The new NTC almost immediately gained international recognition by assuming Libya's seat in the United Nations, the African Union, and the Arab League. It additionally gained recognition from 100 U.N. member states. All of this amounted to significant international recognition, but very little domestic recognition or legitimacy, which it would need to overcome the impending power vacuum. After six months of civil war, and the lack of central power, local militias and councils emerged to pursue old regional rivalries faster than the NTC could establish domestic control.⁵⁹

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At the height of the conflict, the NTC had exclaimed the number of Libyans killed by Gaddafi's forces as "tens of thousands of people." The justification for western intervention was based on this idea of humanitarian disaster and massacre of civilians by the Gaddafi regime. This estimation naturally fed into the narrative for intervention. This estimate however, proved to be a gross overestimate, compared to the figure supplied by the Libyan Deputy Minister for Martyrs and Missing Persons who stated only 4,700 people died and 2,100 were missing on the revolutionary's side.⁶⁰

The final shadow of the Gaddafi era lifted in October when Libyan rebels found Gaddafi hiding in a drainage pipe outside his hometown of Sirte, after his convoy had been targeted by a NATO airstrike.⁶¹ The rebel militia applied swift local justice as he was sodomized with a stick and then shot in the head by a 19-year-old.

Following the decisive military intervention, the international community left Libya to fend for itself. This demonstrated a very destructive naïveté, to think that a country with no democratic traditions, no real unifying identity, skeptical of centralized authority, and indoctrinated in hard-power exercise of authority, would be able to transition to a representative government without substantial assistance. But the US and the international community had no appetite for committing an armed international peacekeeping force, for fear of becoming entangled in another Iraq. No one wanted to "own" Libya like the US had assumed responsibility for Iraq. While the US and our Western allies pleaded compulsion due to a moral obligation to justify their intervention to prevent perceived humanitarian atrocities, no state could tolerate accepting the hard work of nation-building.

Therefore, absence of any peacekeeping forces to remain and help Libya make a transition to a new political system created a humanitarian tragedy. The intervention in Libya represented

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“regime change 2.0,” where the trial-and-error in Iraq showed the limits of western strategy and the failures of nation-building efforts in Iraq. Disengagement following intervention to force regime change represents a natural political response, to avoid repeating such a disaster.

However, the intervention in Libya has further fueled Islamic radicalism, expanded the migrant crisis into Europe, and greatly increased the proliferation of arms in the region. On the other hand, the intervention has given Libyans an opportunity to chart their own course. As one writer phrased it, “a chance is better than no chance.”⁶² It would appear that Russia disagrees with this assertion however. In Syria, Russia and Iran have intervened to support the oppressive, authoritarian Assad regime in quelling the insurgency—in exactly the opposite of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine and the NATO intervention in Libya—in the name of stability and counterterrorism.

Russia’s increased involvement in the Middle East, and specifically Libya, pits them squarely at odds with the UN and the American backing of the Libyan Political Agreement. Some argue the intervention in Libya was a disaster and the country is worse off now than it was under Gaddafi. Adherents of this perspective assert that only an authoritarian government can provide stability in such a volatile part of the world. Russia’s narrative to counter western liberal democracy claims the superiority of authoritarianism. Where democracy leads to polarization and chaos, only a strong authoritarian ruler such as Assad, or Haftar, can provide stability. The eventual success or failure of Libya will play a major role in the clash of narratives between authoritarian systems and liberal democracies. Ironically it was not that long ago that the US would have made a similar calculation. History shows US foreign policy repeatedly favoring stability in the form of authoritarianism in such volatile regions.

Civil War

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In 2012 conditions in Libya showed some promising indications. Oil workers had restored oil output to pre-conflict levels.⁶³ On July 7th Libyans held their first democratic elections in more than sixty years with a 62% voter turnout to choose the 200-member General National Congress (GNC).⁶⁴ In the elections, Islamist parties were not able to secure substantial representation in the new GNC. This contrasts with the success of the Muslim Brotherhood in seizing political power in Egypt. This created a rift between the new government and Islamist militias with weapons and ambitions, seeking rewards for their contributions in the revolution.

The revolution had a very simple fault-line; those who fought for Gaddafi and his regime, and those who fought against him. Once Gaddafi's repressive regime was removed, the vacuum left in its place encouraged previously repressed fractures to emerge rapidly.⁶⁵ Additionally, the lack of effective state institutions prior to the revolution meant that after Gaddafi's regime fell, Libyans lacked any national level mechanisms for political or economic control that the GNC could use to restore order. Moreover, the lack of a meaningful national identity meant the new government lacked a unifying national mandate.⁶⁶ The GNC, as with the NTC before it, was in a race against the clock to secure domestic legitimacy and provide order, stability, and responsive governance to the population.

In desperation, the GNC made an attempt to appease all the disparate groups including the militias, tribal leaders, and Islamists in vain. The contending political parties considered appeasement and conciliation as weakness and they tried to intimidate the council. Order quickly broke down and rebel militias began seizing local power throughout the country. Local military councils became de facto local governments, arming themselves further through the plunder of the previous regime's stockpiles of weapons. In many areas, the instability facilitated

activity by more Islamist movements. In such conditions, Sharia law became a favorable alternative to lawlessness.

By September of 2012, the conflict had deepened and the Islamist group Ansar al-Sharia brought Libya back into the international spotlight. On September 11th, a mob formed and attacked the U.S. consulate in Benghazi and a CIA annex nearby. Four Americans were killed in the attacks including the visiting Ambassador Christopher Stevens. The cause for the attacks was not immediately apparent and the US administration initially tried to claim that protests over the release of an offensive film about Islam caused the attacks. This would later be debunked. The pervasive violence of Libya eventually forced all US personnel to leave following this incident.

Throughout 2012, well-armed militias took power over dispersed towns and cities. Each militia and town competed for its rightful reward for its role in the revolution. The time-consuming and difficult task of disarming, dissolving, and reconciling these groups added further challenges to the government's efforts to provide security, governance, and public services.⁶⁷

Current Political Players

Outside analysts face great difficulty deciphering the military and political back-and-forth power struggles of the messy civil war in post-Gaddafi Libya. As of March 2017 three rival governments compete for power in Libya under the following names: The Presidential Council (PC); General Khalifa Haftar and the House of Representatives (HoR); and the Government of National Salvation.

The PC works out of the Abu Sittah navy base near central Tripoli and presides over the *proposed* Government of National Accord (GNA) also based in Tripoli. The popularly elected House of Representatives (HoR), located in Tobruk (which falls under General Haftar's sphere

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of influence) has not endorsed the GNA composition to this day. The United Nations and the GNA appointed the Prime Minister of the PC Fayez al-Sarraj and his deputy Ahmed Maiteeq—they were never elected.⁶⁸ Importantly, Maiteeq represents the powerful city-state of Misrata.⁶⁹ The Misrata militias played some of the largest roles in the downfall of Gaddafi and the recent ouster of ISIS in Sirte. Only this militia can significantly challenge General Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) coalition of militias.

General Haftar holds the seat of power in eastern Libya. He is an Egyptian-aligned, Russian-military schooled, alleged former CIA asset, and self-described anti-Islamist (yes, you read all of that correctly), who heads the Libyan National Army (LNA) and holds sway over the HoR in the eastern city of Tobruk.⁷⁰

Lastly, the Government of National Salvation (formerly known as the Libya Dawn coalition) headed by self-proclaimed Prime Minister Khalifa Ghwell. This third government contains Islamist actors and draws its legitimacy claims from the originally elected General National Congress (GNC) from 2012.⁷¹ The Government of National Salvation is also in Tripoli and its supporting militias have taken control of several ministry offices in the city.

International players have also entered the political fray in Libya, each vying for influence and the installment of a favorable government. The US, UK, and Italians—formally at least—support the UN-backed Presidential Council, headed by Faiez Serraj, while the Gen. Haftar and the Eastern Tobruk government enjoys the backing of Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Russia. Egypt plays the most influential external power role currently in Libya. Egypt has provided arms to Haftar's LNA forces despite UN sanctions against such actions. Egypt and General Haftar's interests align in that they both seek to eradicate political Islam and increase the autonomy of an Egypt-friendly eastern Libya.⁷²

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According to Al-Monitor, and other media outlets, Russia has joined Egypt in breaking the UN arms sanctions. In attempts to further its influence in Libya, Russia has hosted General Khalifa Haftar aboard the aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov on 11 January, where he and the Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu held a videoconference.⁷³ Russia has also signed a \$2 billion arms deal with Haftar.⁷⁴ This new signaling of support most likely plays into Moscow's interests both commercially in terms of arms sales and oil contracts, as well as its desire to expand its geopolitical influence, while testing western responses to changes in the international order.

As we have seen with Russia's backing of the Assad regime in Syria and Russia's own domestic politics, Russian leaders endorse strong-man authoritarianism and claim that only such a system can ensure stability. By contrast, they argue that democracy invites fracturing, disorder, and civil war. According to a foreign policy research group set up by the Kremlin, in Russia's view people like Syria's Assad and Libya's Haftar are "authoritarian leaders who are not liberal democrats, and are unlikely to introduce democracy in their countries, but they can bring order, and therefore we should support them."⁷⁵ Russia frames the intervention problem differently than the west. However, Russia and the West agree that Libya has become fertile ground for ISIS or similar organizations to thrive. Historically, the US has prioritized stability in the Arab world as well, and has backed repressive authoritarian regimes friendly to the US. However, in the post-Arab Spring world, American policy makers debate this practice aggressively, and the outcomes of events in Libya and Syria will certainly influence public acceptance of one side at the expense of the other.

Finally, the United Arab Emirates has also become involved in Libya by backing of Haftar's LNA. In October 2016, satellite imagery from Airbus Defense and Space showed that

the UAE had established a military base in eastern Libya, where it operates light attack aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), according to a Jane's *Sentinel Security Assessment*.⁷⁶

The foreign powers support for Gen Haftar's rival government in the east greatly exacerbates the challenge of unifying the country and diminishes Gen Haftar's incentive to agree to a power sharing agreement.⁷⁷

ISIS in Libya

US counterterrorism in Libya following the 2011 NATO intervention was limited prior to the spread of ISIS to the Libyan coast. It consisted of a small number of operations targeting High-Value Individuals (HVI), the first of which was Abu Anas Al-Libi. On October 6th 2013, US Special Operations Forces (SOF) captured the long-desired target of the Justice Department. Al-Libi was a senior Al Qaeda figure responsible for the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania that killed 224 civilians. He was pulled from his vehicle in an operation by US forces in Tripoli and taken to a US naval vessel for interrogation. His stay on the naval vessel was short-lived as Al-Libi suffered from advanced Hepatitis-C and liver cancer. This caused his interrogation to be cut short and he was transferred to the US to be entered into the federal justice system and receive medical support. On January 2nd 2015, he died from his ailments in custody while awaiting trial.⁷⁸

At the same time ISIS began to look strategically at Libya, US SOF executed another HVI targeted operation to bring Ahmed Abu Khattala to justice on 15 June 2014. Khattala was the alleged ringleader of the 2012 attack on the US consulate that killed ambassador Chris Stevens. He was captured during another "snatch 'n' grab" operation outside of Benghazi, and like Al-Libi was initially transported to a US naval vessel for interrogation prior to being taken state-side and entered into the justice system. He is currently in US custody awaiting trial, but has since

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offered a motive to the attacks on the consulate. He believed the American diplomatic presence in Benghazi was a cover for a US intelligence-gathering facility and vowed to “do something about this facility.”⁷⁹ It wasn’t until ISIS began to establish territory in Libya that the US would shift significant focus and commit continuous counterterrorism forces.

Amidst the chaos and destruction of Libya’s civil war, in February of 2015, the central coastal city of Sirte became the largest ISIS stronghold outside of Iraq and Syria. ISIS expansion into Libya started in 2014 when the group began to send emissaries to conduct operational preparation of the environment in the coastal cities of Derna, Sirte, and Benghazi. Libya would offer the group an opportunity for expansion and potentially more importantly, a flow of revenue from Libyan oil sold on the black and gray markets. What ISIS emissaries learned was that many of the political, social, and economic failures that created fertile ground for the growth of ISIS in Iraq and Syria also existed in Libya. Most of the country lacked any governmental authority and plundered stockpiles offered a prolific supply of weapons, plus those supplied from outside countries during the initial stages of the revolution. The people suffer severe grievances from lawlessness and economic despair. A greater number of people adopted Islamist sentiments, demanding a return to the righteous path of Islam and Sharia law to overcome the widespread lawlessness and chaos. However, while ISIS in Iraq and Syria exploited Sunni-Shi’a tensions, ISIS in Libya does not benefit from such a divide. Marginalized groups in Libya did not represent sectarian minorities, so the ISIS rallying cry of pan-Sunni doctrine against the apostate Shi’a had little resonance in Libya. Rather, Libyan conditions required ISIS to portray itself as the best alternative to centralized Libyan rule, or rely on coercion to retain control of territories there. Ironically, ISIS relies on the same violent tactics as the tyrannical regimes their members have fought to replace.⁸⁰

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ISIS saw Libya as a strategic foothold for the organization, allowing access and close proximity to the Mediterranean and Europe. Additionally, more fighters per capita came to fight for ISIS in Iraq and Syria from Libya than any other country. The majority of those fighters came from the cities of Derna and Sirte as they flocked to the conflict in support of the romantic idea of establishing an Islamic State based on 700 A.D. sharia law.⁸¹ Libyan returnees from ISIS in Syria and Iraq constituted the original ISIS affiliate in Libya which started in the eastern town of Derna in 2014. However, foreigners have always dominated the leadership of ISIS in Libya.⁸²

Just as in Iraq and Syria, ISIS enjoyed a honeymoon period where it gained legitimacy as a “state institution” through providing services and security to communities. The honeymoon ended quickly in Libya as people suffered from the brutality of the Salafi-jihadi interpretation of Sharia law, and militants quashed any dissenting views. The membership of ISIS in Libya appeared to change in the summer of 2015 in the ISIS stronghold of Sirte when local residents attempted an uprising, which ISIS viciously crushed. Thereafter ISIS would control Sirte through a campaign of fear centered on public executions.

Also referred to as *Tandhim ad-Dawla* (the State Organization) by Libyans, ISIS took the initiative in May of 2016 in a push west from Sirte capturing a strategic traffic junction.⁸³ In response, the Misratan militia began a counter offensive. Observers call the Misrata militia, aligned with the PC/GNA “unity” government in Tripoli, the most powerful militia, which played possibly the largest part in the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime.

In August, for the first time a spokeswoman for AFRICOM acknowledged the presence of a small number of US military personnel, who have established small outposts to build ties with friendly forces, increase American understanding of the situation on the ground, and identify partners and gather intelligence. Shortly thereafter, President Obama declared Sirte an “area of

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active hostilities.” This declaration exempted the area from 2013 rules restricting drone strikes and other counterterrorism operations outside of battlefield zones.⁸⁴

According to open-source reporting, offensive air operations in Sirte, came as the culmination of an extended low-visibility mission against the ISIS stronghold conducted by US special operators. The mission began with the establishment of small outposts from which US forces could build ties with friendly forces and gain an increased understanding of the political and military situation in and around Sirte. Holding talks with an array of militia factions, US operators were able to identify potential partners and gain detailed knowledge of the operating environment.⁸⁵

In Libya as in other politically volatile regions, the need for low-visibility operations was paramount. Following the downing of a French special forces helicopter by Islamist militants killing two French officers, and the subsequent media exposure of French troop presence outside of Benghazi in July of 2016, protests broke out in Tripoli against French intervention. Libyans contended the West was allying with anyone including rival militias opposed to the unity government to combat Islamist militias including ISIS. Such efforts contradict the stated Western political goals of political unification under the GNA.⁸⁶

On August 1st 2016 Operation Odyssey Lightning began with airstrikes on ISIS targets in and around Sirte.⁸⁷ The campaign involved Libyan ground commanders meeting with US Special Operations forces at an operations center outside of Sirte with requests for airstrikes on ISIS targets.⁸⁸ The USS Wasp began launching strikes utilizing Harriers and attack helicopters. The USS Carney would move inshore some nights sending spotting flares over the city. As the US-backed forces made gains, it became clear that most of the ISIS fighters who controlled Sirte were foreigners, signifying that ISIS had lost its appeal to the Libyans of Sirte. Additionally, as

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the offensive moved forward, the militias discovered extensive networks of tunnels allowing ISIS fighters to survive the bombing and allowed them to move unobserved through their shrinking battlespace⁸⁹ Finally, after over seven months of battling the ISIS stronghold, the Libyan forces cleared the city on December 6th 2016 and declared the city liberated.

In response to their defeat in Sirte, ISIS fighters dispersed from their stronghold in multiple directions. Some to the south towards Sebha; some toward Sudan and south-eastern Libya; and some towards the border with Tunisia.⁹⁰ By the end of the operation, the US had conducted nearly 500 strikes against ISIS targets in and around Sirte, guided by intelligence and spotting from US and British special forces on the ground. This combination of US technology and local military ground forces proved successful in providing the decisive advantage to eject ISIS from its stronghold in Libya. Airpower, specifically in the form of both intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and strike capabilities, provided significant benefit to Libyan forces while minimizing the requirement for western “boots on the ground.” Counter terrorism operations in Libya have further highlighted the importance of low-visibility operations amidst the politically volatile civil war. While US airpower and intelligence provide significant advantage to the sponsored force such assistance must be employed with a limited US signature on the ground, allowing military operations in Libya to be locally owned.

On 18 January 2017 President Obama issued his final authorization of a military operation for US air strikes on training camps approximately 30 miles southwest of Sirte that killed more than 80 ISIS militants. Among the dead was Nouredine Chouchane. Chouchane was the mastermind behind attacks on Western tourists in neighboring Tunisia, including an attack that killed 22 people at the National Bardo Museum, and an attack killing 38 tourists at a beach resort.⁹¹ Then Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, said the attacks were targeting “people who

were actively plotting operations in Europe.”⁹² In an interview with the Associated Press, Marine Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, the head of US Africa Command, following the massive airstrike, said that there are still “a couple hundred” ISIS members left in Libya. This is a dramatic drop from the estimated 5,000 ISIS fighters reported to be in Libya last year.⁹³

Even with this low number, in all likelihood ISIS retains the capability to continue asymmetric attacks against targets in urban areas, or the vulnerable oil fields and pipelines in the Sirte Basin.⁹⁴ According to the president of North Africa Risk Consulting, Geoff Porter, helping Libya’s recovering oil sector helped justify targeting the training camps. “Since the defeat of the Islamic State in Sirte, Libyan oil production has increased from roughly 500,000 to 750,000 barrels per day.”⁹⁵ The flow of oil provides revenues for the unity government (PC/GNA), without which there is little hope to restore governance and provide services.

Combating ISIS

Following the expulsion of ISIS from Sirte, the US maintains an active anti-ISIS and counterterrorism posture in Libya. Under UN Security Council Resolution 2259, any form of external military assistance in Libya must be at the request of the legitimate Libyan government, which according to the UN, is the unity government in Tripoli (PC/GNA). According to the European Council on Foreign Relations, some western Special Forces intervention has proceeded without formal authorization from the unity government, at least not overt authorization. Such interventions contradict western political goals and exacerbate tensions between Libya’s rival governments and militias.

While US and other international players’ SOF interventions maintain significant pressure on ISIS, working with various rival militias has counterproductive second-order effects: emboldening the militias and reducing their incentives for backing a unity government. When

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special forces form bilateral relations with various militias in their relentless pursuit of ISIS targets, by strengthening their capacity to fight ISIS they can also fight the central government. This hinders power-sharing bargains that could help unite the country. It creates a surge of armed groups vying to become the “Peshmerga of Libya” and expecting to receive weapons and political support.⁹⁶ Additionally, in instances when the Presidential Council or unity government do authorize US military intervention, such as the recent targeting of ISIS camps in the southern desert, this plays into their opponent’s narrative of a puppet government in Tripoli. An example of this challenge occurred in January of 2016, when French special forces helped the LNA push back radical Islamic groups including ISIS from parts of Benghazi. This was purely a counter-terrorism (CT) endeavor and not meant to lend sponsorship to General Haftar’s government, however domestic rivals perceived it as such.⁹⁷

Without the sectarian divides of Iraq and Syria, Libyans have not continued to flock to the ISIS banner in large numbers inside their own borders. They increasingly see ISIS as a foreign occupying force. It has failed to win the hearts and minds of Libyans.⁹⁸ For the time being, this means they must rely on foreign fighters to replenish their forces in Libya or they must combine efforts with other Islamic extremist organizations. However, any further deterioration into full-blown civil war may raise the appeal of ISIS for Libyans. Military gains against ISIS could easily be lost. If Libya falls further back into violence and civil war, it will once again become a de facto safe haven for ISIS to regenerate. The US and European allies must maintain vigilance and pressure against ISIS in Libya and support local security forces favorable to the GNA. As ISIS has been put “against the ropes,” the United States must align its political and military goals in Libya. American forces must understand the political implications of any CT operations at the expense of political objectives. Support should include low-visibility operations which harness

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the technological advantages our forces can offer to enhance locally-led counterterrorism operations. As with the Sirte offensive, intelligence sharing combined with US airstrikes provide a proven option to maintain the initiative against the organization. The combination of US military technology and local GNA-aligned forces' social and cultural depth of understanding of the operating environment represents the best practice for employment of SOF forces.

These operations can help provide space and time for the political, economic, and social changes required to reduce the conditions favorable for ISIS. We must understand however, and accept the fact that in our efforts to work “by, with, and through” local groups in combating ISIS, we often decrease those same groups' incentives to concede weapons and power to a centralized government. The Presidential Council recently created a military Joint Command in an effort to consolidate Libyan efforts in fighting ISIS and to prevent Libyan sub-national actors and militias from profiting from direct relationships with western SOF.⁹⁹ This Joint Command represents an appropriate step in the right direction, assuming that it actually works to facilitate ISIS combat loses. We must also understand that counter-terrorism will not succeed without stabilization efforts to remove the underlying conditions favorable to of ISIS. If a central or sub-national government cannot provide security, services, legitimate governance, and justice, ISIS will find ways to regenerate and exploit vulnerable populations. Success requires creating resilient communities backed by responsive government that preclude the conditions for ISIS to spread, in combination with constant military pressure on militia groups to severely limit their ability to spread terror. Counterterrorism disconnected from a political process only leads to a lengthy war of attrition.

Securing the Peace

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The new Trump administration has vowed to eradicate ISIS. The administration has also sent mixed messages regarding its perception of relations with Russia. Prior to the Libyan intervention, Russia had voiced concerns that the toppling of the Gaddafi regime would lead to even more instability with regional implications.¹⁰⁰ Russia has clearly backed the anti-Islamist strongman, Gen. Haftar and his HoR government in the east. Will the Trump administration join the Russia/Egypt/UAE coalition and abandon the UN-backed Presidential Council in favor of Haftar? Such a move would essentially endorse the Russian narrative that only authoritarian rule can secure the peace and defeat the violent extremist organizations in the region. Or will the US tacitly support the Russians and Egyptians in favor of Libya's strongman Khalifa Haftar by disengaging?¹⁰¹ Either of these courses would be a misstep for the US and a vote of no-confidence in peaceful resolutions to conflicts in the region. It would be a return to the foreign policy of the past where the United States accepted and even supported authoritarian rulers in the name of stability, so long as they favored ties to the United States.

While the post-conflict political process must be locally owned, it will require very careful support from outside sources. The UN and international community must continue to offer their support for a political settlement, encourage the constructive dialogue between the Presidential Council and Gen Haftar, and assist with economic recovery. Moving the HoR away from the east and out from under the heavy influence of Gen Haftar may allow a shift in voting favoring the unity government. It must be conveyed to Egypt and Russia that the Misrata faction will not acquiesce to a Haftar regime, and they remain willing to go to war to prevent him from taking over, as they did in 2014-2015.¹⁰² Such a situation would enable ISIS and other extremist organizations to reemerge and spread. Sustaining current operations against ISIS in Libya requires avoiding implosion or backsliding into another violent civil war. While fighting has

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fallen into a lull between rival militias, the political process in Libya needs greater attention and diplomatic influence. Without a political solution, the gains against ISIS will slowly disappear.

Conclusion

Libya's history of brutal colonialism under the Italians, traditional tribal organization, and repressive autocratic rule under Gaddafi, left Libyans ill-prepared for the challenges of building a national government, following liberation from Gaddafi. While the NATO intervention gave Libyans the opportunity for self-determination, the international disengagement that followed allowed Libya to descend into chaos. In this security vacuum, ISIS saw a strategic opportunity to spread its influence, secure oil revenues, and establish territory in North Africa. While the group failed to win over the hearts and minds of Libyans, and the US-backed offensive evicted the group from Sirte, small cells still exist in the major cities and the vast ungoverned deserts in the south. Left alone, these cells will continue to wage attacks against fledgling governments in both the east and west, as specified in their vicious doctrine of terror tactics. Regardless of any failures by political rivals to agree on the establishment of an effective national government, the United States and its western allies must continue aggressive yet selective intervention against ISIS--amidst the low-intensity civil war, pairing local forces with our technological advantages at the behest of the unity government aligning our political and military objectives. Politically, the US must match our words and deeds in supporting the UN-sponsored Libyan Political Agreement while supporting de-escalation mechanisms, disarmament, and reconciliation of the various militia factions. Events in Libya will continue to play a significant role for the new administration in the fight against ISIS, controlling the flow of refugees to Europe, the stability of North Africa, and the uncertain relationship with Russia.

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