A Partition for Libya?

Given the many deep divides in Libyan society and the ongoing strife there, some observers have begun to suggest that the only possibility for a stable civil society in Libya would be to partition the country and create a kind of confederal model for Libya.\(^1\) The country remains deeply divided along tribal and other lines, as it has been for decades. Qaddafi’s (successful) efforts to unify Libya—admittedly via violence and oppression for the most part—led to the creation of unusual period of order and relative stability in Libya. Libya’s deep tribal divisions were exploited by Italy throughout the Italian occupation of Libya, from 1912 when it won Libya from the Ottomans through 1943, when it lost Libya to British. The Italians exploited these divides first by defeating some rebellious tribes in detail before successfully turning other tribes against each other. The Italians then managed to occupy a series of key oases before eventually crushing the remaining rebellious groups. After this, the Italians were able to unify the two former Ottoman colonies—Tripolitania and Cyrenaica—into a single Libyan state, creating a unitary civil and military government for Libya. Eventually the Italians were able to disarm the Libyan population and transition from a purely military occupational government to a civilian colonial one.

In terms of prospects for stable governance, Libya’s situation is complicated. In summer 2014, the Libyan government essentially split in two. One government is headquartered in Tobruk and has received some international support (from Egypt, the UAE, and Russia) largely due to its anti-Islamist ideology. The other government is headquartered in Tripoli and is pro-Islamist in nature and supported by the Libya Dawn group of Islamist militias (as well as Qatar, Sudan, and Turkey). But this is not simply a story of two rival governments: Libya is plagued by a host of independent militias and paramilitary groups, mostly espousing Salafist ideologies. Further complicating the situation is an ISIS contingent of at least 3,000, which seized the oil-rich city of Sirte. For ISIS, Libya represents the a base of operations from which it can initiate further operations across North Africa, control vital oil assets, and launch further human trafficking operations throughout the Mediterranean, including the ability to place additional ISIS operatives in Europe.

The city of Sirte is a key site in Libya; it was Qaddafi’s hometown and remains the central point of contact between Libya’s two regions. Today, ISIS controls the city. A variety of militias coming from all over Libya have been fighting the free the city from ISIS control. These militias seem to be making some progress in pushing ISIS out of the city, forcing ISIS forces to withdraw into the desert, requiring them to focus on more mobile, flexible operations rather than direct control of territory. ISIS’s need and desire to control territory and fixed infrastructure certainly provides an opportunity for anti-ISIS forces in Libya, as it has in Syria and Iraq. Even if ISIS is dealt even greater defeats in Libya, Libya’s problems will remain, since the fundamental

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problem in Libya is not ISIS but rather internal factionalism and tribalism. Once (if) ISIS is defeated, the temporary alliances between the various Libyan factions will quickly dissolve, plunging what is left of the nation into further civil war.

The deep divisions in Libya, just as in Syria and Iraq, may simply be intractable. One possible approach would be to divide Libya along regional lines, with three possible regions presenting themselves: Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan. An extreme solution to be sure, but these regional/local governments could probably do a better job of protecting local security and economic interests, while retaining a loose/weak national confederated government structure. The danger here is that a partition could create such a weak federal/central government that it could not effectively manage a regional confederation. It remains to be seen if this model of government could work in the deeply divided Middle East but it might provide enhanced security and stability, which would lay the groundwork for economic and infrastructural reconstruction in the long run.