

Power struggle risks tipping Libya deeper into crisis

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IMED LAMLOUM

ESCALATING tensions between rival Libyan armed forces threaten to plunge the North African country deeper into turmoil only weeks after the fall of the Daesh group's bastion Sirte. The deeply tribal nation has been sharply divided since the 2011 ouster of longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi, with rival militias vying for influence and control of oil resources.

The power struggle pits an administration based in eastern Libya, backed by military strongman Khalifa Haftar, against a UN-brokered unity government in Tripoli supported by militias from the western city of Misrata.

"The situation is most likely going to escalate further given that the voices of war are now the loudest" after an air strike by Haftar's forces against the Misrata militias, analyst Mohamed Eljarh of the Atlantic Council said.

The Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) is the centerpiece of Western hopes to stem an upsurge of militancy in Libya, but it has failed to assert its authority across the country.

The rival authority in the east has refused to cede power and has its own armed forces, which call themselves the Libyan National Army (LNA) and are led by Haftar.

Pro-GNA fighters mainly from the Western town of Misrata drove Daesh from Sirte in December, capping a deadly months-long campaign for Qaddafi's hometown.

The Misrata militias include hard-liners determined to fight Haftar's army.

The LNA has battled militants in second city Benghazi for more than two years and blames Misrata militias of backing diehard extremists.

On Dec. 7, two days after Sirte's liberation, tensions flared when hard-line Misrata militias joined an attack against Haftar's forces launched by an alliance of extremists and tribal fighters.

The assault on a town near Libya's "oil crescent" — where Haftar had seized four export terminals from pro-GNA forces in September — was launched from Al-Jufra air base in southern Libya.

The LNA repelled it and since then has frequently bombarded the base, calling it a den of "terrorists."

On Monday, an LNA air strike hit a military plane carrying senior Misrata military and political figures who were flying out of Al-Jufra, killing one and wounding several.

The Misrata militias dispatched reinforcements to Al-Jufra as well as the Sebha region further west.

Martin Kobler, the UN special envoy to Libya, said he was "alarmed by the tensions in Libya's south" and urged all sides "to act with restraint and to resolve issues through peaceful dialogue."

US State Department spokesman John Kirby warned that further fighting could embolden the Daesh group and other militants to reorganize.

"We note with deep concern... renewed fighting between Libyans... fighting which we believe will only benefit Daesh and other violent extremists there," he said.

"The truth is that to date, Libyan forces have made progress against Daesh in Sirte and in eastern Libya, and that's what makes this renewed fighting here of concern," Kirby added.

Despite the recapture of Sirte, which had been Daesh's main base in Libya, the militant threat persists in the country where experts say Daesh cells are present in several other areas including Tripoli.

Eljarh said a confrontation between Misrata and Haftar's forces could play out in Tripoli as well as the "oil crescent" and the southern region.

Such an outcome "will have a knock-on effect on Libya's oil and water facilities adding to the suffering of the entire population especially in western Libya and the capital," he added.

Eljarh said that the attack on the plane carrying Misrata dignitaries had inflamed even the most moderate factions in the western city.

"Hard-liners ... have now managed to successfully switch public opinion within Misrata in their favor" and could now mobilize public support against the LNA, he added.

Mattia Toaldo, senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, said Haftar was trying to form alliances with Libya's powerful tribes to control the south of the country.

"The south is the most immediate flashpoint where Haftar is trying to replicate the strategy of tribal alliances and limited show of force that allowed him to capture the oil crescent in September," he said.

"Sirte is another flashpoint with Misratan fears that Haftar will use tribal allegiances to strip Misrata of its gains on the ground," he said.

■ AFP



NATO and Russia in game of cat and mouse in Baltic skies

MICHEL MOUTOT

FRENCH jets have been engaged in a game of cat and mouse with Russian fighters in the skies above the Baltic states, as NATO keeps a close eye on Russia's ambitions.

Four French Mirage jets this week completed a four-month tour of duty in Lithuania — and their crews were busy, engaging with Russian planes on 23 occasions.

"We use the term 'intercept' but it is better to say 'identify' and 'observe,'" Lt. Col. Isaac Diakite told AFP at the base in the freezing surroundings of Siauliai in northern Lithuania.

"The Russians take care to remain in international airspace, flying along the Baltic area without going into it. They have a right to be there, but so do we," he said.

"So we take off to have a look, identify the plane and photograph it, to show we're there."

Russian planes have been flying close to NATO's northern border for several years now, and the number of flights increased after the Ukrainian crisis started in 2014.

"It's a little game, a demonstration of strength to show that they are back after their fleet underwent large-scale modernization," said Gen. Olivier Taprest, commander of France's aerial defense, who took part in a ceremony in Siauliai to mark the end of the deployment.

NATO radars regularly pick up Russian Sukhoi fighter-bombers, Antonov transport planes and strategic long-range Tupolev bombers crossing the so-called Omega Line, NATO's self-imposed line that runs from the north of Norway. Crossing it triggers alerts at NATO bases and planes are scrambled.

Tupolev bombers were spotted three times in the final months of 2016, flying over the Baltic states and to the west of the British Isles.

A year earlier, in November 2015, Tupolevs were even recorded flying around Ireland and across the Mediterranean to drop bombs in Syria before heading back to Russia through Iranian airspace.

It was done, the French officers said, merely as a show of force to the Americans.

"It was completely useless from a tactical point of view, but it sent a message: if you calculate the distance flown, it shows you could reach New York," Gen. Taprest said.

NATO's jets are rather like guard dogs kept behind a fence, without ever actually biting or even barking — their presence is to show Moscow that the transatlantic alliance will defend its members' skies and approaching the limits of that will provoke a reaction.

The procedure is strictly ordered.

The two "intercept" jets first fly to within a kilometer (half a mile) behind the "bogey," as an unidentified plane is called. Then one of them moves next to the wing of the target at a distance of between 300 meters (yards) and 50 meters.

The aim, clearly, is to let the pilot know he is being watched.

"If it's night-time, we shine a light into their cockpit," one of the French pilots, who wanted to be identified only by his nickname "Rom's," told AFP.

"Sometimes they respond with their decoy flare, sometimes they don't. Then we switch to autopilot to allow us to take photographs which are then sent to the military command."

If the Russian plane does not deviate from its course and remains in international airspace, no further action is taken.

However, if the plane intrudes into NATO airspace, the response ratchets up in several steps, starting with the firing of a decoy flare until actual warning shots are fired. The final response would be launching a missile to down the plane.

"We can try to contact the Russian pilot over the radio on the aeronautical emergency frequency. Sometimes they reply," Rom's said.

When pilots fly side-by-side at a distance of 50 meters, they can see each other up close and can even signal to one another.

"But most of the time they don't look at us. They have their path to follow and they don't deviate from it," he added.

■ AFP

Republican Obamacare repeal challenge: people with HIV

Lawmakers are currently considering repealing the massive 2010 US health reform law known as Obamacare as soon as this month.

REUTERS

SCIENTISTS have shown conclusively that treatment not only improves the health of people infected with HIV, it also stops transmission of the virus that causes AIDS.

That public health issue is just one of the challenges Republicans face as they attempt to overhaul the Affordable Care Act, a law that brought health insurance coverage to some 20 million people — including tens of thousands of Americans living with HIV.

Lawmakers are currently considering repealing the massive 2010 US health reform law known as Obamacare as soon as this month.

But the roadmap is tentative, and complicated: It would keep the Medicaid expansion and the new individual insurance plans in place and delay major changes for up to three years. This would give Republicans more time to craft a replacement plan, but it is not clear if individual insurance prices would skyrocket during the delay or what the new coverage will look like.

HIV experts are among the groups, including insurers and hospitals, that have started lobbying lawmakers. They want to keep the current level of insurance coverage in place and say that even "repeal and delay" would disrupt care, put patients in jeopardy and increase the risk of transmission of a deadly communicable disease.

Republicans will have the added worry of reducing coverage for an infectious disease that once represented certain death, but now can be controlled with daily medications that also keep the disease from spreading.

"The evidence is iron-clad that when people with HIV are treated and their viral load is suppressed, their likelihood of transmitting HIV goes down to almost zero," said John Peller of the AIDS Foundation of Chicago. "So, any kind of interruption in care is going to result in more cases of HIV."

In Illinois, one in three people with HIV gained coverage through Medicaid expansion or the new individual insurance plans created under the ACA, according to an analysis compiled for Reuters by the AIDS Foundation of Chicago.

The number of HIV-positive individuals covered by Medicaid in Illinois rose by more than 50 percent between 2013 — the year before the new health-care coverage went into place — and 2016, when 13,694 people with HIV were enrolled.

HIV experts in Republican states have already been wrestling with the issue of caring for patients with HIV. Earlier this year, North Carolina became the 48th US state to permit the use of federal grant

money via the Ryan White HIV/AIDS program to pay insurance premiums for people with HIV.

"We're late to the party, and now the party may be over," said Allison Rice, director of the Health Justice Clinic at Duke University School of Law in Durham.

Insurers, including UnitedHealth Group and Aetna, pulled out of Obamacare exchanges for 2017. The plans are offered to everyone regardless of their health and cover everything from routine check-ups and emergency room visits to organ failure and cancer, and insurers said costs of doing that were higher than expected.

Policy experts say the delay to an Obamacare replacement may give insurance companies little incentive to stick with the Obamacare individual insurance plans. Insurance companies have asked lawmakers to keep subsidies in place and make changes they hope will help stabilize the market, such as delaying deadlines for 2018 plan submissions.

"It creates a really difficult environment for insurers to commit to the market," said Carmel Shachar of the Center for Health Law & Policy Innovation at Harvard.

Shachar co-wrote a letter signed by 174 national, state and local HIV organizations urging members of the senate not to repeal or modify the Affordable Care Act without a clearly defined replacement plan.

That was followed by a letter on Tuesday sent by more than 950 HIV medical professionals urging Congressional members not to repeal the Affordable Care Act without a viable replacement plan, and to sustain the federal commitment to the Medicaid program.

"In most states, prior to the ACA, low-income patients with HIV were denied Medicaid coverage until they became sick and disabled, and did not have the resources to participate in health savings accounts," the group, which included the HIV Medicine Association, said in a statement.

America's Health Insurance Plans in December said an immediate repeal of federal support — particularly federal cost-sharing programs and Medicaid expansion — would jeopardize care for millions of Americans and disrupt market stability.

Vice President-elect Mike Pence told Republican lawmakers on Wednesday the transition team is "mindful of disrupting the market," but signaled that a replacement plan would not be in place at the time the law is repealed.

"The first order of business" was to "repeal and replace Obamacare," Pence told a news briefing, adding that "the architecture of the replacement" would come together "in the weeks and months ahead."

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