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**THE CHALLENGE OF VIOLENT
EXTREMISM IN NORTH AFRICA:
THE CASE OF LIBYA**

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Chairman King, Ranking Member Rice, Committee members, I am grateful for this opportunity to speak with you today about the extremist threat from North Africa.

At the intersection of the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, the countries of North Africa and the Maghreb comprise a vitally important region that casts a long shadow on surrounding areas and, especially, on the security of the Mediterranean basin. The extremist challenge from this region is especially dire given the numbers of fighters who went to Iraq and Syria to fight with the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaeda and who are now returning.

But beyond the threat of returning jihadists, it is the weakness of states in the region that presents the most significant and long-term driver of extremism. Since the Arab uprisings in 2011, most states in the region are now significantly weaker, unable to meet the basic demands of their citizens, and facing mounting economic pressures in an era of sustained low oil prices.

Beset by fraying social contracts, the dashed hopes of the Arab Spring, and diminished opportunities for employment, some youth of the region have fallen prey to the appeal of jihad peddled by the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. The jihadists' critiques of state-led corruption and the abuses of the judiciary and police have also resonated strongly; heavy-handed government policies have often fueled the very radicalism they purport to quash. Added to this are broad swathes of ungoverned land and porous borders, where extremists have established logistical hubs and training camps, often negotiating access with marginalized tribal communities or co-opting existing smuggling networks.

Finally, a key enabler of jihadism is state collapse and the outbreak of open armed conflict. Anywhere there is an established insurgency or civil war, we can expect the emergence of transnational jihadists who insert themselves among and within the warring parties and often recruit combatants to their ranks through superior funding, ideological motivation, and firepower.

I will focus my remarks on Libya, a failed state that embodies a witches' brew of these afflictions and that poses the most immediate extremist challenge. Despite the successful Libyan-led campaign against the ISIS stronghold in Sirte, along with other successes by different Libyan armed groups against ISIS pockets in the west and east, the country remains at risk. Scattered ISIS members are regrouping and al-Qaeda affiliated fighters who defected to ISIS are now returning back to al-Qaeda-linked groups, more experienced and battle-hardened. Vast portions of its southern deserts remain a thoroughfare for the movement of fighters and arms to the Sahel and beyond.

But more importantly, Libya's worsening political conflict, fueled in part by regional meddling and a contest for oil resources, has pushed it to the brink of civil war. This disastrous outcome would provide yet another opening for ISIS, al-Qaeda, or some new permutation to arise.

To prevent such a scenario, Mr. Chairman, it is important the United States, working in tandem with the Europeans and regional states, redouble its diplomatic efforts to find a durable and inclusive political solution to Libya's conflict. At the same time, it should be ready to assist on a broad array of functions, to include the rebuilding the security sector, diversifying Libya's economy, advancing the rule of law, and supporting civil society. Any near term counterterrorism (CT) actions inside Libya should reinforce the longer-term goals of political unity and inclusive governance, and great care

should be taken to ensure that CT engagement does not inadvertently worsen factional conflict by privileging one group over another.

My remarks draw from visits to Libya over last two years to areas of conflict marked by a jihadist presence: Sirte, Benghazi, Sabratha, Tripoli, and southern Libya.

HOW JIHADISM GREW IN LIBYA

Libya has a longstanding tradition of jihadism stretching back to the Qadhafi era that saw waves of volunteers going to Afghanistan and then Iraq, where some developed ties to al-Qaeda and what would later become al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and ISIS. These migrations belie the popular notion that Qadhafi kept a lid on extremism: to the contrary, economic neglect and repression at home helped fuel radicalization among certain neighborhoods and communities, whose participation in jihad on foreign battlefields was in some sense a transference of their frustrations against the regime.

In 2011 and 2012, scores of Libyan youths went to Syria and Iraq, some of whom returned to establish the nucleus of the Islamic State in the eastern city of Derna, displacing existing Islamist armed groups. From there, the group spread to the city of Sirte, in the oil-rich center of Libya and established cells in Sabratha to the west, Tripoli, as well as attaching itself to existing Islamist and jihadist combatants in Benghazi. It then set about implementing the draconian style of governance it had practiced in Raqqa and Mosul, assaulting oil facilities to hasten the demise of the state, and attacking the facilities of police and militias who posed a threat. The Islamic State's leadership soon directed foreign aspirates to proceed directly to its North African outpost rather than Syria and Iraq. Foreigners played a crucial role in its expansion in Libya, especially jihadists from Tunisia (some of whom arrived to train for subsequent attacks against their homeland), the Mahreb and the Sahel, and military and governance advisors from Iraq and the Gulf.

It is important to note two dynamics about the rise of ISIS in Libya that have strong implications for the future of jihadism in Libya.

First, Islamist and jihadist communities after the 2011 revolution engaged in a series of fierce debates about strategies and priorities, to include whether to affiliate themselves with the post-Qadhafi state and to participate in elections, and whether and when to use violence. Developments in neighboring states, namely the closing of political space and military-led crackdown on political Islamists in Egypt, strongly influenced the outcomes of those debates in favor of more anti-state and radical actors. At home, a number of developments swayed the debate as well. The most important of these was the outbreak of open armed conflict in Libya in 2014 between the so-called Dawn and Dignity camp, abetted by opposing blocs of regional states (Turkey and Qatar for the former; Egypt, the UAE, and Jordan for the latter) provided further space for the rise of radical jihadists, especially the Islamic State, to expand. For nearly two years, the two opposing Dawn and Dignity factions were more focused on fighting each other than on dealing with the extremist menace that gathered in their midst.

Second, the Islamic State in Libya won support among communities and tribes that had been politically marginalized in the post-Qadhafi political order or threatened by local rivals. This was especially apparent in Sirte, a city that had suffered after the revolution because of its affiliation with the Qadhafi regime. Here, members of historically loyalist tribes, the Warfalla and Qadhadhafa, welcomed the Islamic State as a form of self-protection against abuses from the neighboring city of

Misrata, which had assaulted Sirte at the end of the revolution and exacted revenge against its inhabitants. Similarly, some local Islamist militias in Benghazi cooperated with the Islamic State on the battlefield because they faced a shared enemy, the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) forces of General Khalifa Hifter.

Finally, jihadists from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and other groups based in the Sahel have exploited weak governance and dire economic conditions in Tuareg tribal areas of southern Libya for logistics and training. Their fighters draw upon a long history of local knowledge stretching back to Sahelian insurgencies of the 1990s and Algeria's civil war. After the revolution, these groups established links with local armed groups and jihadists in the north, particularly the northeast in Benghazi, Derna, and Ajdabiya. Ansar al-Sharia trained fighters loyal to the seasoned Algerian jihadist Mukhtar Belmokhtar, prior to their January 2013 attack on the Tiguentourine gas facility in Amenas, Algeria.

Local sympathizers and collaborators in southwestern Libya have facilitated some of this transnational presence and movement. That said, the Tuaregs' political and communal opponents in Libya have often exaggerated the depth and scope of extremist penetration, particularly in town of Ubari and farther west. The jihadist presence is mostly logistical and the result of weak administrative and police control in the south, rather than widespread support. Where jihadi relationships exist with local armed groups and smugglers, it is often transactional, resulting from a shared interest in keeping borders uncontrolled. Aside from this presence, the penetration of radical ideology into Libyan Tuareg communities or into the south's social fabric more broadly is minimal.

Taken in sum, these three dynamics underscore the fact that the radical jihadist current in Libya is neither constant nor immutable. It ebbs or expands according to the local economic and political conditions, government capacity, and conflict in the country. This is why American engagement with a broad range of tools is so important in denying jihadists the chance to reemerge.

RISKS OF RENEWED CONFLICT AND RESURGENT JIHADISM

Last fall, Libyan forces loosely affiliated to a UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, backed by American airpower and Western special operations, scored a hard-won victory against the ISIS stronghold in the central city of Sirte. Elsewhere across the country, Libyans ejected ISIS cells and fighters from Derna and Benghazi in the east, from Tripoli, and from the town of Sabratha near the Tunisian border.

Today, ISIS is no longer a territorial force in Libya in any meaningful sense. That said, its demise presents a number of dangers.

First, remnants of ISIS could still reconstitute themselves and sow trouble. Already, fighters have fled to the desert valleys south of Sirte, where they've tried to regroup in small encampments like the one the United States bombed on January 18 of this year. The group is said to have a residual presence around the western town of Sabratha, a longtime hub for Tunisian jihadists, and its clandestine cells are still capable of attacking in and around the Tripoli, already wracked by intra-militia fighting. This poses a potential danger for the return of foreign embassies and businesses to the capital.

Beyond these specific threats, Libya remains an attractive host to jihadism, whether from ISIS, al-Qaeda, or some new variant. The conditions are ripe: a long legacy of jihad, economic despair, a

governance vacuum, and worsening polarization that could leave some communities feeling as if they have no recourse but violence. Some tribes in Sirte, such as the Qadhadhafa and Warfalla, see the Misratan-led victory against ISIS as less of a liberation and more of a conquest—and it was their grievances against Misratan domination that gave ISIS its opening in the first place.

Most importantly, though, the struggle against the Islamic State has given way to a renewed national-level conflict. Western diplomats had hoped that fighting ISIS could serve as a springboard for political unity among these warring camps.

In fact, the opposite has happened.

Local campaigns against ISIS across the country were pell-mell and carried out by disparate and hostile armed groups without any unifying government authority. For example, rival jihadists in Derna ejected the Islamic State, and in the western coastal town of Sabratha, local militias involved in migrant trafficking helped lead the campaign. In Sirte, the militias from the powerful city of Misrata that defeated ISIS were only loosely tethered to the GNA in Tripoli—and many in fact fiercely opposed it. Now that ISIS is gone, some have turned their guns on the GNA.

In Benghazi, Hifter's LNA has largely defeated ISIS and other jihadist groups but, in the process, it severely ruptured the city's social fabric, displacing thousands of families and unleashing exclusionary forces such as tribalism and ultraconservative Salafism. Across the east, Hifter has replaced elected municipal councils with military governments and cracked down on civil society and freedom of the press. Disturbing evidence has surfaced of war crimes committed by soldiers under his command, such as the exhumation and abuse of enemy corpses and summary executions of both combatant prisoners and civilians. None of this is a recipe for enduring stability or success against radicalism. And indeed, Islamists evicted by his campaign have already waged attacks against his forces outside of Benghazi and in the oil crescent.

Most ominously, though, the campaign against ISIS has helped embolden Hifter and his supporters to make a renewed push for national domination with the capture of major oil facilities in Sirte (though not uncontested) and repeated threats to invade Tripoli.

This looming danger, Mr. Chairman, demands immediate engagement from the United States. Having expended considerable military effort in helping Libyan forces wrest territory from the Islamic State last year, the United States should now turn its attention to ensuring the country does not slip into civil war and building a cohesive government, while at the same time dealing with residual and emerging jihadist pockets.

WHAT CAN THE UNITED STATES DO?

Sticking to the mantra of supporting the GNA in Tripoli, as Washington and Western governments have done over the past year, is no longer a viable option. But neither is the seemingly easy solution of backing a military strongman such as Hifter.

Hifter has no realistic prospect of stabilizing Libya through military rule. His Libyan National Army is neither national nor an army. Even in the east, the bulk of the LNA's forces are drawn from civilian fighters—militias of varying backgrounds that are increasingly disguised as formal army units. In the west and south, the LNA units have a distinctly tribal composition, provoking suspicion among

neighboring communities that view them as little more than tribal militias. Because of their geographic concentration in the east, they are not useful partners in tackling the flow of migrant smuggling, which is mostly based along a western strip of coast stretching from Misrata to the Tunisian border.

The idea that Hifter's forces could take over Tripoli and rebuild the Libyan state is thus highly implausible. Indeed, encouraging Hifter to expand his reach toward Tripoli risks triggering a war over the capital that could drag on for years. With a third of the country's population living in the greater Tripoli area, such a conflict could cause displacement and humanitarian suffering on a scale not seen to date in Libya. It would also offer opportunities for jihadist mobilization. Non-Islamist armed groups in Tripoli would join forces with Islamist-leaning fighters to confront Hifter. As in the case of Benghazi, the most extreme and irreconcilable jihadist elements would invariably rise to the fore.

Even if Hifter were able to establish control over Tripoli, his rule would cause more, not less, radicalization. Like Egypt's al-Sisi, Hifter makes no distinction between ISIS, al Qaeda, and the Muslim Brotherhood (whose Libyan branch has supported the GNA's formation). His stated goal of killing, jailing, or exiling Islamists of all types risks provoking moderate, pro-state Islamists into going underground and allying themselves with radical jihadists. Meanwhile, doctrinaire Salafis promoted and encouraged by Hifter—who preach absolute loyalty to a sitting ruler—would further extend their influence, and enforce their harsh interpretation of Sharia law more widely.

In sum, unification through military action is not realistic in Libya. Instead, the United States, in conjunction with regional states, should support a renewed push for a political settlement. This requires a number of things.

First, it necessitates the deterrence of any moves toward military escalation by exerting credible pressure on the warring parties, to include the threat of sanctions and exclusion from any future security assistance.

Second, it requires rebuilding the negotiating architecture, with regional states taking the lead. The challenge will be brokering a common platform for dialogue among states with vested interests in Libya. How to deal with an increasingly assertive Russia will pose a particular difficulty. Recent initiatives by regional states like Tunisia and Algeria should be encouraged, but they need to be transferred into a more coherent framework. A small group of states, closely coordinating with each other, could act as mediators and, eventually, witnesses and guarantors to an agreement.

The U.S. role in such a process could be to provide strong and explicit support for the mediating consortium. Most importantly, it would require putting pressure on the regional states still backing Hifter like the Emirates and Egypt and, more recently, Russia. Every effort should be made to broker a deal that includes the general within the framework of a civilian-controlled military. But if Hifter proves recalcitrant, the United States must be willing to push his regional and international backers to end their support.

Beyond the Herculean task of forging a political compact, the United States faces the enormous task of helping whatever new Libyan government emerges to succeed by delivering on basic services, security, and, especially, economic growth.

An immediate priority is securing the capital of Tripoli, which means reaching an agreement among militias to remove their forces and heavy weaponry outside civilian areas, and to make way for a

protection force that can be built up over time with training and support from the outside. Another imperative is safeguarding key strategic assets like oil facilities, airports, and ports from factional conflict. Here, a number of options could be explored such as an agreement for de-militarization or protection by a neutral, third party force.

The new Libyan government will need enormous help on the economic front, in setting up an equitable and rational system for the dispersal of oil revenues to employees and to municipalities, while working to diversify to other sectors. The development of alternative livelihood sources is especially important in countering migrant smuggling, especially in the south, where young men are drawn into smuggling networks because of the absence of alternatives.

The judicial sector is another key area of assistance, along with prisons, particularly with regard to captured Islamic State fighters and jihadists returning from abroad. Many are currently incarcerated in militia-run prisons with little or no judicial oversight, where they are reportedly tortured or subjected to religious rehabilitation programs that, by them-selves do not prevent recidivism. Local communities and, especially, meaningful opportunities for employment or education provide the best hopes for post-prison reintegration.

The challenge of rebuilding Libya's police and army will likely be a multi-year and even decades-long investment, given the decrepit state of the regular army under Qadhafi's long reign and the plethora of armed groups today. A training effort in 2013–14 by the United States, Britain, Turkey, and Italy to build a national army—the so-called general purpose force—failed in part because the Libyan government was divided among itself, with some factions favoring militias and because there was no unified military structure or institutions for recruits to join. Those recruits that did complete the training returned to Libya and were either put on leave or melted back into militias.

Future training programs risk repeating these mistakes, unless the new government agrees on a roadmap for building a unified and professional military, delineating its geographic divisions and functions, while at the same time formulating strategy for demobilizing and re-integrating militias. This requires a degree of political consensus, which Libya has hitherto lacked. Once that is reached, the United States can assist in helping Libyan defense institutions in such areas as planning, payroll, and logistics through an intense advisory effort, possibly under the auspices of an expanded Defense Institution Reform Initiative (DIRI).

Mr. Chairman, the United States also has an enormous opportunity to re-engage with Libyan society through assistance on municipal level governance, civil society, media, and education. These sorts of programs are an important corollary to the development of formal political, security, and economic institutions which, given their decrepit condition under Qadhafi, is likely to be a generational endeavor. And Libya possesses enormous human capital that could benefit from such engagement, itself a cause for guarded optimism: a literate and educated population, small in size, geographically concentrated, and largely lacking in the stark and sometimes existential ethnic, sectarian, and linguistic divides that afflict other Middle Eastern states. But proposed cuts to American foreign aid programs on this front would deprive us of this opportunity, with likely damaging results for future stability.

On a similar note, I would like to add that the ban on the travel of Libyan citizens to the United States is not only morally reprehensible, but self-defeating with regard to goals in the country. It deprives the United States to opportunities for important engagements and exchanges with visiting scholars,

students, officials and citizens—engagements that are all the more important since Libya is closed off to American diplomats. But more importantly, it represents a profound betrayal of American values and of the hopes ordinary Libyans attached to America ever since the 2011 intervention.

Mr. Chairman, in my repeated travels to Libya I've enjoyed the hospitality and protection of countless Libyans. In Sirte, Sabratha, Tripoli, and Benghazi, I've seen firsthand the sacrifices Libyan young men made in battling the Islamic State. Despite popular depictions, the vast majority of Libyans have rejected extremism in all of its forms. I therefore urge the immediate repeal of this law, for Libya and the other affected countries.

Mr. Chairman, Committee members, I thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.