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Institute for
Conflict Transformation
and Peacebuilding

“An overview about the developments in Libya”

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Interview about the current situation in Benghazi

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On February 17th 2011, in the course of the Arab spring, the Libyans launched the uprising against Muammar al-Gaddafi, who had lorded over them for 42 years. The popular revolt came at a high cost: Thousands died in the fighting that toppled the dictator. Still, the overwhelming majority of the population welcomed their new freedom with joy and gratitude to the NATO forces that had intervened.

Since the overthrow of Gaddafi, Libya’s political landscape remained very much in flux and 2014 is marked by a worsening of the political and security situation with the threat of civil war being voiced for the first time.

There are now two governments in Libya. One is based in the eastern city of Tobruk and is backed by the elected parliament: The House of Representatives (HOR). The other is established in the capital Tripoli and

relies on a handful of former General National Congress (GNC) members to provide a semblance of legitimacy.

Each relies on alliances with armed militias; those in support of the HOR have named themselves Operation Dignity (Karamah); those who oppose it go by Operation Dawn (Fajr). Both sides have repeatedly used force against civilians, institutions and infrastructures, keeping Libya's transition in a balance of terror.

The elections in June 2014 produced an HOR assembly with a strong presence of liberals and federalists and registered support from neighbouring countries and international partners. After the elections the opposing Libyan Dawn camp used force to prevent the HOR from meeting and emboldened by the conquest of Tripoli, reinstated the GNC and appointed al-Hasi as prime minister. The attacks of the Libyan Dawn on Tripoli resulted in the destruction of the international airport as well as large parts of the city.

In addition to the Dawn and Dignity coalitions, a growing presence of jihadists affiliated with Ansar al-Sharia and the Islamic State are also gaining grounds in Libya. Taking advantage of the widespread political instability, jihadists are using the country as a hub to coordinate broader regional violence and launch attacks. Since these terrorist groups regard Dawn and Dignity as enemies, their growth only threatens to further escalate the violence and fracture warring parties.

Conflicts over economic resources are also acute in the field of illicit activities, with competition for control of smuggling routes in the south of the country causing clashes between different tribes.

At the moment Libya continues to suffer from the ongoing political and armed struggle between various Libyan factions. The rise of the Islamic State (ISIS or ISIL) has further complicated matters—as has the reluctance of the international community to act assertively against opponents of the democratic process, contributing to Libya's downward spiral into civil war and anarchy. The dialogue facilitated by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) remains the best hope for a political settlement in Libya. However, the dialogue faces huge challenges and recently had to accept a severe setback when the General National Congress in Tripoli and

its supporters rejected a final draft agreement presented by the head of UNSMIL Bernardino León.

The civilian population

The current conflict in Libya has uprooted and displaced a significant part of the Libyan population. By December 2014, UNHCR estimated a total of 360,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in various parts of Libya as a result of escalating armed conflicts in the latter half of 2014. The current displaced population in the country (as of May 2015) is estimated to be between 420,000 and 440,000 persons. The most affected area continues to be Benghazi. A direct humanitarian impact has been achieved by hosting IDPs in over 70 schools in Benghazi, which had been closed because of the ongoing fighting.

A few schools re-opened in March 2015 but still most of the schools and the university remain closed. Continuous indiscriminate shelling affects the security of IDPs in these schools and many families in Libya face multiple displacements (UNHCR statistic report).

Benghazi

Benghazi, Libya's second-largest city was the cradle of the revolution and home of the leading opposition organization, the National Transitional Council, during the liberation war that ousted Gaddafi's regime. More recently, though, the city has earned a reputation as a playground of extremist groups. The city struggles with a string of assassinations and car bombs targeting security and army personnel as well as activists. Under the Gaddafi regime the city has suffered from systematic neglect and corruption, which ultimately deprived the city of any form of efficient public services or infrastructure. The result was a harsh environment for the civil society.

In July 2014, Libya's Islamist militant group Ansar al-Sharia claimed to have seized complete control of Benghazi, declaring the city an "Islamic emirate". Ansar al-Sharia's declaration comes a month after jihadist militant group IS announced an "Islamic caliphate" within the territory. These claims have been contradictory to utterances made by General Haftar, who stated that his troops withdrew only from certain position within Benghazi.

Most Ansar al-Sharia branches, both in Tunisia and Libya, foster strong relations with the IS, even though they have not explicitly pledged allegiance to the group. However, it is known that the leaders from Ansar al-Sharia, specifically in Tunisia, have travelled to Syria and confessed loyalty to Baghdadi.

Interview with Nohad Chebaro, Eastern Libya HD Centre Representative, about her work and the current situation in Benghazi

What kind of work is your organization doing in Benghazi? What are your objectives and where lies your main focus?

The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, otherwise known as the Henry Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, or HD, is an independent non-governmental organization that assists in mediation between conflicting parties to prevent or end armed conflicts. Founded in 1999, the aim of the organisation is to promote and facilitate dialogue among the leadership of the main belligerents. We also conduct research and analysis on mediation and peacemaking in support of the operational projects to improve international efforts to secure and sustain peace. The HD opens channels of communication and mediates between parties in conflict, as well as facilitates dialogue and provides support to the broader mediation and peace building community. The HD facilitates dialogue in both confidential settings as well as public ones. The organisation was founded to pursue Henry Dunant's vision of a world more humane. Our goal is to reduce the suffering caused by armed conflicts in the world through mediation and dialogue. We try to prevent armed conflicts, help to resolve them or to mitigate its consequences.

And this is what the HD Centre is doing in Libya since the beginning of the revolution in 2011. We engage in capacity and skills building and we organized numerous workshops on National Reconciliation in key locations across the country. HD has developed close contacts with principal groups of Libyan mediators as well as tribal and religious leaders known as the Hukama (Wise Men), working closely with them to achieve the resolution of regional conflicts. We have also been providing technical assistance to the Elders in their mediation of local conflicts. Through diverse activities and collaborations we further foster the empowerment of women in Libya

regarding conflict resolution. HD supports their contribution to achieve a ceasefire. Moreover we are holding workshops in the three main cities of Libya: Tripoli, Benghazi and Sabha on the following themes: ceasefires and conflict resolution, constitution, National dialogue and early warning. After the assassination of the US Ambassador in Benghazi, we were forced to close our office in the city, like all the international NGOs, but we continued with our peace building activities and the facilitation of dialogues, informal meetings and confidential mitigation, trying to open a space for a productive dialogue between the opposing parties.

What are the difficulties of working in Benghazi? How does it make you feel to work under such hard conditions and in such an insecure environment?

NGOs in Benghazi are facing many problems, which makes it difficult to achieve improvements. Due to the dangers and ongoing fights that foreigners are exposed to (by the Ansar al-Sharia or the IS in Libya), many international NGOs have already withdrawn from the city. The poor security situation in Benghazi is slowing down any initiative taken by activists, but is still not stopping them to try to reach their objectives like assisting the IDPs (internally displaced persons), helping by reopening schools, etc.

While the men are busy with fighting, my personal initiative is trying to bring together all the activist's women, who are suffering the fear of losing their loved ones (husbands, children, brothers, friends) and to start a project for a cessation of hostilities and to step by step achieve a post-conflict peaceful coexistence in close collaboration with them. I will present this project and discuss it at the Summer Academy in Caux speaking about being creative if you believe in peace and in humanity. Still, obstacles, difficulties and the insecure situation obliged us to postpone most of the planned movements in the city. Regarding my project a difficult challenge was to find the right way to speak to a woman who had just lost a family member. How can we help to mitigate the desire for revenge? Which language and terms do we have to use when talking to the families of women connected to the Ansar al-Sharia or the Islamic fighters. In these difficult conversations I get the assistance of some women preachers to use the Quran language, to appease and reconcile the spirit of revenge. As a volunteer at the Libyan Red Crescent, I further work together with the

society by helping organizing a safe corridor for humanitarian issues, the evacuation of foreigners and family reunifications.

Regarding your question, I often ask myself, if I am not putting my family in too much danger by working on the ground and having direct contact with women of the fighters, who I try to integrate to stop the war.

One of my friends was being assassinated in her house, because she was calling for peace. Women activists (political or social ones) are targeted by the IS, the ASS (Ansar al-Sharia), the Mujahedeen and other groups. It is a fact that I live in a dangerous conflict area, but it is not a reason for me to lose any hope that a peaceful coexistence can be installed.

Does the HD Centre support the civilian population? If you do so, what kind of support are you providing?

There are local NGOs working in the humanitarian field, like the Libyan Red Crescent Society, assisted by the International Committee of the Red Cross. In cooperation with the active local civil society organizations, we are trying to assist children by opening some classes with volunteer teachers. Due to the fighting and in order to avoid putting the students into danger the teaching is carried out online. This support was a great success and therefore we added a psychological support for the young students and their families. These family visits are also done by volunteers. Another important work which we are doing is the assistance of IDPs through the distribution of food and non food items received by local donors. One group of volunteering women specialized themselves in working with sick children suffering from chronic diseases.

Others are visiting detainees, giving assistance and trying to connect them with their families.

How would you describe the overall atmosphere? Do the citizens of Benghazi still have hope or are they frustrated? Do they organize themselves in political parties, aid organizations or similar associations?

Citizens who are still resident in Benghazi were long deluded by the political authorities because of the silence regarding what was going on exactly. They have to deal with five to six deaths daily and the city is getting more and more destroyed. Women worry about the safety and the future of their children, as well as the youth is worried about their own. But luckily there is still some hope left and the love of life is a good reason to

motivate them to do something. The good spirit of the volunteers who organize themselves in order to create a peaceful and humanitarian road to end the current conflicts provides also a certain support for the civilian society. Civilians who refuse to be part of the conflicts as a fighter have started to join the peace building activities. An example is the increasing number of youth volunteers joining the Libyan Red Crescent showing that they want to change their future into a better one. A group of youths even organized a pressure committee to submit their demands to the government as well as the International Community.

How is the situation regarding the IS? Are they winning new members? Why or why not?

The international community is rightly worried about the spread of the Islamic State and its ideology. The fact that IS forces have even managed to take hold in Libya, so far afield from the group's original strongholds in Syria and Iraq, has been a source of considerable anxiety. One of the reasons the IS is winning more and more members is that the life in the city of Benghazi is frozen since four years. That means no schools, no universities, no governmental institutions and no possibilities for free time activities. Normal life as they have known it is destroyed and the economy is completely paralyzed. The IS or the Islamic Mujahedeen fighters are specifically recruiting the young, even almost children, offering them a considerable amount of salary (2000 US-dollars monthly and the same amount to their families). When losing hope due to the harsh conditions, becoming a fighter for the IS and dying as a martyr can sadly be a temptation for the young ones.

Interview: Anna Zwald, ICP