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LAST CHANCE FOR LIBYA:
LIBYAN FACTIONS AND INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

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Today Libya appears to be a country on the verge of collapse, finding itself in a chaotic situation close to what could be called a "multi-factional" civil war, albeit low-intensity. Libya's parliament, elected in June, is recognized by the international community but contested by the militia controlling most of Tripoli and by radical Islamists who hold much of the eastern part of Benghazi.

The causes. The causes of this situation are numerous and cannot be dealt with here in depth but mentioned only: some can be ascribed to the Qaddafi regime, in particular to its special form of "informal" government that prevented the creation of institutions that would survive his fall; while others, perhaps larger ones – as also emphasized by Karim Mezran of the Atlantic Council – can be ascribed to the "false myth of revolution" purportedly underway since February 17, 2011. The revolution narrative has prevented comprehension of the fact that events following that date were actually a genuine civil war. A conflict that did not end with the murder of Muammar Qaddafi but, after remaining latent for several months, progressively heightened with the course of time

and the inability of Libyan governments to come to terms with history and begin a new chapter of coexistence by creating a new social pact between all parties.

A negative acceleration of events led to the removal of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt, a factor that weighed gravely on the possibility of a political agreement between the Libyan forces close to the Muslim Brotherhood and the laic ones. After his overthrow the phenomenon of political polarization progressively extended to the military sphere, with clashes in the city of Tripoli, and particularly at its main airport, between Misrata militias (linked to the Brotherhood) and the forces of Zintan, close to the party of Mahmoud Jibril.

The responsibility of the international community. The international community is certainly also to be blamed, having conducted a military operation that, in the deluded hope of leaving "Libya to the Libyans" left Libya swamped with problems and did not assume, or only belatedly assumed, its own responsibility for politically aiding the new Libya.

What can be done now? While a new international mili-

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tary operation is trying to halt the destabilization of huge parts of Syria and Iraq provoked by the jihadists of the Islamic State, can the international community contemplate a new intervention in Libya? Will be it effective or counterproductive? With what goal? With what means?

Reduce the polarization. First of all one must try to take a view of what is happening and of the aforesaid political polarization that is less Manichean than what the international press reports. Libya does not appear to be totally in the hands of Islamic radicals, although in such a chaotic situation they certainly constitute the biggest threat to the country's future. The Misrata militias cannot be compared to or equated with the Ansar al-Sharia jihadist group prevalently present in Cyrenaica. Although the Misrata militias and their political references in the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) have often held ambiguous positions and have sometimes shown a tactical convergence with the radicals, this tie is not at all ideological but represents the outcome of events and of the military campaign launched indiscriminately against "Islamists". It is difficult to imagine a pacified Libya that excludes Misrata, its third largest city. Moreover, government departments in Tripoli appear to be coming under the control of the National Salvation Government (lead by Misrata-MB), further isolating the elected Tobruk-based House of Representatives and the government of Abdullah al-Thinni.

The international community must launch a unified message and try to speak with a single voice. The first – important – step was taken with a joint communiqué from European countries, the United States and regional actors, from Egypt to the Emirates, Qatar and Turkey, which have interests in Libya and have taken very different stances, ending up by fostering this polarization. The second step are the UN-brokered talks in Ghadames. At last Ban Ki-Moon in Tripoli urged the formation of a national unity cabinet as the only way to restore stability. EU and the Atlantic Alliance can help to maintain this common position. The option to pursue remains that of involving all the forces that showed themselves willing to participate in the democratic process. The real wedge

should be forced between jihadist forces and the Islamists willing to participate in this process. It's necessary to make pressure on Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, also through Tunisian Ennahda party or Turkey. It should be clear that the international community will not accept an unelected government in control of the capital, the central bank and public administration. At the same time it's necessary to strongly recommend Egypt and the Gulf countries to support the negotiations, not to make air raids.

Political agreement. Several different ways of intervening have already been hypothesized. In my opinion whatever intervention is imagined should take what has just been described into account. Equally important is another consideration: the aim of any political or military operation cannot be to back one side to the detriment of the other but rather to ensure a neutral political agreement, which would also lessen the risks of any mission failing and of making mission forces a target. The only kind of "boots on the ground" option could be based on a "Lebanese model" and it should be preceded by diplomacy, with an agreement between the various parties and with international and regional communities united. Operations of another kind would arouse anti-Western feelings without any certainty of stabilizing the country (as the recent cases of Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate).

Jihadists in Cyrenaica. In any case, remaining a problem in this country's chaos is the presence of a declaredly jihadist force. Ansar al-Sharia can certainly be contained militarily but at the same time we need to keep its members from gaining political influence. Ansar al-Sharia and the various militias allied with it appear to admire "caliphate" or ISIS, especially between the young generations of mujahidin. Many Libyans have fought and are fighting on the Syrian-Iraqi front. In percentage of population, Libya is one of the countries with the most mujahidin and this – after their return home – has favored ties between Libyan radicals and those of Syria and Iraq (more than 500 Libyans are still present on this front). The Islamic Youth Shura Council announced last week that they are affiliated to ISIS. However, Ansar al-Sharia is not just a

terrorist group but also seems to be gaining the consensus of inhabitants through "dawa", or charitable works and control of the territory in substitution for the state, the welfare state and Libyan institutions. It's here that the battle is harder and more complex. If the international community permits to Ansar al-Sharia and other radical militias in Cyrenaica to became a sort of Hamas or Hezbollah, the stability of the whole country will be compromise.

General Haftar's aim is military containment. This has enabled the international community and Western forces to avoid direct intervention. However, there is always danger in having others do your work. First and foremost, Haftar has shown no desire to distinguish between Islamists, declaring his will to "eliminate them all" and this has fostered the tactical convergence we spoke of between radical militias and Islamist political forces of various types. In addition there is the risk of creating a new autocratic regime and putting the country in the hands of new military leaders lacking charisma and the consensus that at least those of the past enjoyed. In August, Haftar's Operation Dignity was formally integrated into the national army when Nazhuri, a senior Dignity commander, was appointed Chief of Staff. However, the operation remains with its own command structure under Haftar. It's important that the House of Representatives and the government gain effective control of these forces.

In conclusion, recent international meetings have shown that the international community's interests are in not letting Libya collapse. No one can allow it to. Nonetheless, the solution that must be found in Libya, not just for momentary but for lasting stability, has to be the most inclusive possible. This is the hardest road to take but the only one that can bring results. The international community should de facto foster creation of a new social pact between Libyan components, a real attempt at nation-building whose first steps we see only now, hoping that it's not too late.