

Senate Foreign Relations Committee testimony

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Chairman Kaine, Ranking Member Risch, committee-members, I am grateful for this opportunity to speak with you about Libya's worsening security crisis and the next steps for U.S. policy in building Libya's army.

I join you today having flown back last night from a two-week research trip to Tripoli, western mountains and the troubled eastern city of Benghazi. It was my sixth visit to the country and my fourth since the Revolution.

The focus of my recent trip was to assess the prospects for demobilizing and disarming the country's powerful militias while building up the regular army and police and reforming its defense institutions. I held frank and detailed conversations with a variety of official and non-official actors: the Special Forces commander in charge of securing Benghazi, militant federalists in the east, the heads of Islamist militias, civil society activists, and parliamentarians.

Diagnosing the Problem

Much of Libya's worsening crisis stems from the power and autonomy of the country's roughly 300 militias. Lacking its own police and army, the transitional government in late 2011 and 2012, cut a deal with these militias, putting them on the payroll of the Ministries of Defense and Interior. By all accounts this has been a Faustian bargain that has given the militias freedom to pursue agendas that are political, ideological, in some cases, purely criminal.

The militia menace has been especially stark in Tripoli, where armed groups from outside the city--Misrata and Zintan--have claimed what they see as the spoils of the revolution, occupying public and governmental institutions, raiding the army's training camps and facilities, and pressuring the parliament to pass legislation. In the east, militias allied with the country's federalists have shutdown oil production while in the south they guard the porous frontier.

Over the weekend, I witnessed a remarkable turn of events in Tripoli that suggest public patience with the militias has reached a tipping point. On Friday protestors marched peacefully on a compound in Tripoli belonging to a powerful, predatory Misratan militia, demanding that they leave. Forty-six people, including the elderly, women and several adolescents, died in a hail of gunfire by militiamen wielding heavy caliber weapons.

The message was uniform and clear: “We want the militias out of Tripoli, and the national army and police to take their place.”

When I left Tripoli, the Libyan national police and army—long thought to be non-existent and missing in action—were out on the streets of Tripoli in full force, to thunderous applause from the city’s residents. The question before us now is whether this remarkable episode presages a real dismantlement of militia power, or whether it is simply a tactical redeployment.

U.S. Security Assistance: Opportunities and Challenges

In response to Libya’s deepening crisis and Prime Minister Zeidan’s request for greater outside assistance at this year’s G8, the U.S., Italy, Britain and Turkey are planning to train and equip a new Libyan national army, denoted in military terms as a “general purpose force.” In theory, the concept seems sound: bolster a professional Libyan army to protect elected officials and institutions, allow the government to function free from militia pressure, and compel the militias to disarm.

But the plan also carries the risks. Unanswered questions about the force’s oversight, mission, inclusiveness of different regions, and composition could potentially polarize and destabilize Libya’s already tenuous landscape. Many Islamists in the east believe the planned army is hardly a national one but rather a palace guard for the Prime Minister. Already there are signs that militias are trying to bloody the nose of the new army before it even gets off the ground.

To avoid potential pitfalls, the following issues and questions need to be resolved:

First, the exact role of the general purpose force needs to be determined. As its name implies, it is meant to be a regular infantry, focused initially on securing government installations and protecting officials. But what Libya really needs is a more specialized, gendarmerie-type service to tackle border security, illicit trafficking in narcotics and weapons, and low-level insurgency.

It does not need another bloated, conventional military force that sits in its barracks—a far too common occurrence in the Arab world, where armies’ self-entitlement and insularity have proved unhealthy for democracy. The Libyan revolution was not launched to replace one colonel for another.

Second, the “general purpose” force must be and must be perceived as, nonpartisan and professional. To prevent it from becoming a private militia of a particular tribe, region, or political clique, recruits must be integrated into mixed units that draw from a broad swath of Libyan society. The case of a separate and underreported U.S. effort to train a small Libyan counterterrorism unit inside Libya earlier this year is instructive. The unit, set up by U.S. special operations forces, was hardly representative of Libya’s regional makeup: recruitment appeared to be drawn overwhelmingly from westerners to the exclusion of the long-neglected east.

And at least some of the new enlisted ranks and junior officer corps must come from the

militias. Many senior officers in the Libyan army detest that idea, viewing the militiamen as ill-disciplined rabble or excessively politicized. In many cases, though, these young men bring the real-world battlefield experience and small unit leadership that is so desperately needed in the Libyan army, whose junior and midlevel officer ranks Qaddafi had hollowed out.

Teaching recruits to function as cohesive fighting units—rather than focusing solely on imparting individual soldiering skills— is also essential. The training mission cannot just produce soldiers who are better marksmen but who return to Libya and melt into the militias, or who moonlight as militiamen in addition to their day job in the army. To prevent that worst-case scenario, proper vetting for motivation, aptitude, past human rights violations, and criminal history is also vital. Recent failures bear this out: an effort last year to train Libyan police officers in Jordan collapsed when poorly screened recruits mutinied against what they perceived as unduly Spartan living conditions.

Third, and perhaps most important, the training program must be accompanied by a reinvigorated demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration program for those in the militias. These young men must be given economic and social incentives to leave and either enter the work force, pursue schooling, or join the regular police and army. Many of the revolutionary fighters I have spoken with over the past two years do not want remain in the militias. But few real alternatives exist.

Mr. Chairman, to conclude: given the stunning display of popular and government willpower I witnessed this weekend, the U.S. and Libya's friends face an important window of opportunity to help improve Libya's security situation. But the U.S. needs to proceed cautiously and deliberately. Better training and equipment alone will not automatically confer legitimacy on the new army, compel militias to surrender their arms, or entice Libyans to join up.

That legitimacy will only be obtained through broad political reconciliation, a constitution, and a representative government that is able to deliver services across the country.

In this respect, U.S. security policy must take a holistic view. It must go beyond building an army to include sustained assistance to the Prime Minister's ongoing initiative of National Dialogue that can establish agreed upon "rules of the game" and address and mitigate the deep seated roots of the political disenchantment that fuels the militias' persistence. The U.S. must also lend advice and expertise to the ongoing constitutional process that will ensure proper civilian control of the military and delineate authorities between federal and municipal government.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today.