

# **An Arms Buyback for Libya?**

The Libyan civil war of early 2011 was one of the bloodiest conflicts in recent history, with an estimated 30,000 killed and 50,000 injured. While Muammar Gaddafi's death marked a watershed moment in Libyan history, the months of frenzied violence that preceded it saw a massive buildup of arms and munitions in the country. In the months leading up to and after his fall, Gaddafi's arms warehouses all across the country became unsecured; such was the level of accessibility that on-ground reports alleged that swarms of pick-up trucks were simply driving up to the facilities in question and leaving with arms stockpiles. Missing weapons, coupled with unsecured arms caches constitute a major security threat to Libya and Africa.

## **What Caused the Buildup?**

The Libyan uprising led to a sudden escalation of violence, with many international actors coming to the support of the weaker rebel faction, the National Transitional Council (NTC). While the thrust of these measures involved the establishment of a No-Fly Zone and increased sanctions on Gaddafi, some nations went as far as choosing to arm the rebels. The rebel fighters were aided by French airdrops of armaments, including rocket-propelled grenades, in the Nafusa Mountains, military aid from the Egyptian and Sudanese governments, and alleged arms support from Qatar, the U.S. and the U.K. Additionally, arms smuggling occurred across the Tunisian border, where military equipment including but not limited to AK-47 rifles, grenade launchers, anti-tank missiles, machine guns and sniper rifles were imported.

The high concentration of arms in Libya was also a product of Gaddafi's own large stockpile. Despite a UN arms embargo on Libya between 1992 to 2003, and again from February 2011, Gaddafi maintained multiple multi-million dollar arms contracts to successfully consolidate his arsenal. Between 1970 and 2009, Libya spent close to \$30bn on weapons. Most of these arms came from the USSR (and now Russia); other beneficiaries of Gaddafi's rapidly expanding arsenal included Austria, Bulgaria, France, Germany and Italy. In total Libya imported military planes worth \$375m, just under \$135m in small guns and \$115m in electronic equipment from the EU between 2005 and 2009. The onset of the crisis saw Gaddafi escalate his arms supplies. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Libya received a supply of arms from Belarus, just before the UN imposed its second arms embargo. In July 2011, Gaddafi travelled to China with the intent of purchasing weapons in a \$200m deal. Although China insists that no arms were delivered, the Libyan opposition claims that Chinese firms - in violation of the embargo - shipped weapons via Algeria. Experts have often questioned the rationale of amassing such a large supply of arms, many of which lay unused. Gaddafi's arms buildup was also disproportionate in light of the actual skill level of many of his troops - operating many of the arms he purchased required technical expertise far beyond that possessed by the average Libyan soldier.

One plausible explanation is that Gaddafi intended to rely on technology to a far greater extent than an army in the defense of his country. Instead of de-centralizing the monopoly of power over multiple state apparatus, Gaddafi deliberately kept state institutions like the Army and police force weak in order to prevent any chances of an uprising against him. Libyan foreign policy interests, in particular, the tenuous relationship Libya shared with Israel may also explain Gaddafi's accumulation of weapons. In 1979, Gaddafi called Israel a "colonialist-imperialist phenomenon"; he went to say, "There is no such thing as an Israeli people. Before 1948, world geography knew of no state such as Israel. Israel is the result of an invasion, of aggression." To a limited extent, Gaddafi used his arms inventory as a stockpile, leveraging it to oppose Israel's existence. His rhetoric indicated a desire to assemble a combined Arab and Islamic force strong enough to wage a successful "holy war" against Israel. It is possible that this anti-Semitism was derived from Gaddafi's hatred for the U.S. Libya always shared a fractured relationship with the U.S., most notably during the Cold War, where Libya supported the Soviet bloc. In light of Cold War developments, it is likely that Libya amassed arms to prepare itself for the possibility of a proxy war being fought in Africa. Additionally, weapons deals helped reinforce Gaddafi's solidarity to the USSR, and later to Russia.

### **How Bad is the Situation Now?**

The surfeit arms floating have caused a massive illegal and clandestine immigration problem, with fighters from other African nations and members of militant groups, including Al Qaeda, constituting a major influx of people into the country. This population influx, a product of permeable Libyan borders, is exacerbating the arms smuggling and trafficking problem in Libya. Contrary to U.S. claims that no weapons have left the country, Libyan weapons are disappearing at an alarming rate.



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Intelligence reports claim that African jihadist group Boko Haram, Al Qaeda militants, Somali pirates and Iran have all acquired weapons from Libya in the last few months. Additionally, weapons originating from Libya have been found in Algerian and Egyptian arms black markets, with Egypt and Yemen responsible for intercepting shipments of Libyan arms headed towards Syria. Recently Lebanon impounded Sierra Leone-flagged Letfallah II for carrying Libyan weapons. Prominent labeling on the boxes confirmed their origin - one was marked "Tripoli/Benghazi SPLAJ", a reference to Libya's former name — the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. Another was stamped Misrata, the Libyan town which formed a base for the rebel faction. The leader of the north Africa-based Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb [AQIM] has publically claimed to be a beneficiary of the lax weapon control in Libya.

These consequences are aggravated by increased local conflict, with many breakaway militia groups forming a third faction in the conflict between the Gaddafi loyalists and the NTC. The government appointed National Army is very small, which has seen armed

militias administer the law in various provinces across Libya. In January 2012, the Brigade 93 militia took control of Bani Walid from the NTC following an armed insurgency. Most militias in Libya were armed by NATO during the Libyan Civil War; their arms supplies have also been extended by ransacking unguarded arms silos across the country.

### **An Arms Buyback Program?**

Given the gravity of the situation in Libya, there is a need for a coordinated policy response to contain the weapons flight. Some experts have called for a weapons and arms buyback scheme sponsored by the U.S. and other Western Governments. It is thought that such a policy would be similar to previous American policies in Afghanistan (the U.S. attempted to buyback Stinger missiles lent to the Mujahideen for the Soviet invasion) and Iraq (the U.S. attempted a comprehensive light arms and missile buyback program). The key thrust behind the policy – Western Governments and NATO, operating via the NTC would engage in a “no – questions asked” purchase, as was the case with the program in Iraq. Given that numerous weapons have already left Libya, the scope of these programs should be expanded to nearby African countries as well.



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An important logistical question given the diverse array of weapons available on the blackmarket, is which arms will be bought back. Questions remain over whether financial incentives should be offered in exchange for all weapons. If the U.S. were to take such an approach, it would face the big challenge of long-term financial sustainability. Past missile-only buyback programs have generally cost millions of dollars - for instance, the Afghani buyback program cost upwards of \$50m, with the CIA paying around \$70,000 for each missile. It is apparent that the costs of a comprehensive program would be far too high. Given a limited budget, it is important to prioritize the capture of man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADs) and other Surface-to-Air missiles (SAM) over light arm removal. Libya had approximately 20,000 MANPADs before Gaddafi's death, and while 5,000 of them have been recovered, there is a need to recover as many of the remaining 15,000 that have were not destroyed in NATO airstrikes. Another reason to target the buyback program specifically at missiles is the development of a Kalashnikov culture in Libya. Over the last few months, there has been a mass proliferation of small arms, with many households now owning at least one firearm. This increase in gun ownership is a product of many different forces. Firstly, it's a product of the years of oppression from the Gaddafi regime, which has led citizens to believe that they cannot outsource the protection of their liberties to government. Secondly, powerful militia movements have absorbed a significant number of the loose small arms floating around the country. These groups face a prisoner's dilemma when asked to participate in a small arms buyback program because they lack the guarantee that other militia will join in. This

collective action problem presents itself as a significant stumbling block to the successful implementation of a small arms buyback scheme.

A relevant consideration with regards to missile buybacks is the scale and extent of Libyan MANPADs. While authorities refused to confirm the composition of the 5000 missiles recently seized in Libya, it is widely thought that it comprises mostly SA-7 missiles. In fact, Gaddafi's tranche is thought to have a significant number of first generation MANPADs, against which flares, laser jammers and advanced laser equipment have demonstrated success of diffusion. There were numerous reports suggesting that Russia had supplied Gaddafi with shoulder-fired SA-24 missiles in the months leading up to the revolution, many of which have now been looted. These reports are only partially accurate; while it is true that SA-24 missiles have indeed been stolen from caches, it has emerged that these missiles were supplied without gripstocks, making it only possible to launch them from vehicles. While initial assessments offer an encouraging view of the actual potency of Gaddafi's MANPAD collection, without an inventory of arms purchased by the former government, it is impossible to know for sure the composition of Gaddafi's stockpile and how many weapons are missing. Similar concerns exist over the functionality of Gaddafi's SAMs. In May 2011, a Western defense analyst counted 31 long-range SAM sites and 17 radars belonging to the Libyan air force. The bulk of this missile force comprises Soviet-designed SA-2, SA-3 and SA-5 systems dating from the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, the Libyan army possesses a large number of short-range SA-6, SA-8, SA-9, SA-13 and Crotale missiles. While Gaddafi's war chest is large, experts claim that much of it is also obsolete. The scant opposition that NATO faced from Gaddafi's Anti-Aircraft weaponry when establishing a No-Fly Zone over Libya highlights the weaknesses of the stockpile.



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Missile buyback would have to be part of a larger program that would have to include negotiations with the local militias and help from the National Army in tracking down other missiles, securing unguarded caches and tightening Libyan borders. However, if implemented correctly, missile buyback could play a pivotal role in this larger effort. Given that Gaddafi's arms warehouses were ransacked by civilians, buybacks offer them many lucrative incentives. Firstly, any American backed consortium has the ability to outbid buyers on the black market. The increased supply of arms on the black market has had the corresponding economic effect of lowered costs. Reports claim that missiles costing \$10,000 are selling for \$4000. A similar situation was seen following the American invasion of Iraq, where Soviet SA-7 and SA-7b missiles looted from Saddam Hussein sold for as little as \$500. This lowered cost puts a U.S. backed plan at an advantage, giving them the ability to pay more than the market price in order to secure the loose missiles. The per-unit cost of the MANPADs in question (~ \$4000) should also prevent Americans from getting outbid, unlike in Afghanistan where Stingers procured

\$100,000 on the black market, a price higher than the CIA's \$70,000. A secondary economic benefit to those individuals who participate in the program is the reduced costs of transportation of missiles. Additionally, clandestine sales carry with them the large opportunity cost of being caught, which coupled with the above incentives make it more fruitful to deal with a U.S. sponsored plan.

It is also argued that attempts to shore up Libyan borders cannot occur without halting arms smuggling. Negligent and inadequate policing is often facilitated by the flourishing black market, where checkpoint officers are bribed to allow illicit dealings to take place and to allow illegal immigrants to cross over. This fluidity is having damaging impacts on regional stability. For example, reports claim that Tuareg militants, previously employed by Gaddafi, left Libya with sizable stockpiles of weapons on their way back home to northern Mali, where they have successfully wrested control away from the Malian government. Similarly, Boko Haram appears to be profiting from the expanding blackmarket. Reports indicate that the worsening piracy situation in the Gulf of Eden and Indian Ocean is also a product of the loose weapons regulation in Libya. The benefits of a missile buyback scheme seem fairly intuitive given the worsening regional security dynamic. Seven states (Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, Burkina Faso and Senegal) are urging the Libyan government to tackle its weak borders and committed their collective support to aiding the NTC. It seems likely, given this support, that an arms buyback scheme will result in a harder crackdown on the black market.



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Experts who have criticized the policy have pointed to the impact it will have on fuelling domestic conflict in Libya. Local militias in Libya have large stockpiles of missiles, often dismantling them and re-using them as launchers etc. The high concentration of weapons in the hands of militias poses two problems. First, militias might be willing to turn in missiles, but would use the finances from the same to purchase light firearms and other munitions, in order to support their conflict in disputed

territories. Second, in order for the American model to have any efficacy, they would have to pay a price higher than the black market. However, this would see militias profiting off arbitrage, with profits again, likely re-invested in the purchase of light arms. A similar situation took place in Iraq, when the U.S. instituted a gun buyback program. There were credible reports of Iraqis turning in older weapons in order to buy newer models on the street.

Missile buyback schemes also face the problem of driving up the black market price. In order for the black market to be completely eliminated, the U.S.-backed plan would have to be the only buyers on the market. Such a market outcome is entirely unrealistic owing to the large illicit demand for missiles. An additional consideration is the varying quantity demanded – while the U.S.-backed plan would seek to absorb every single surface-to-air missile in circulation, militant groups such as Al Qaeda only aim to acquire a reasonable



number of missiles, a number that varies based on the size of the group. Therefore, the presence of well-funded terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda could lacerate the buyback and recovery campaign. The failure of the Stinger missile program in Afghanistan is testament to the difficulties of eliminating opulent clandestine actors.

A buyback policy also carries with it the possibility of escalating humanitarian costs in the region. Given a significant presence of missiles amongst the civilian population, militia may turn to using coercive methods such as torture, or even outright killing people in order to accumulate missiles for sale. Critics of a buyback policy claim that it a short-term surge in casualties will make the NTC's position untenable, and may even prompt claims for autonomy from distressed zones. These concerns, while legitimate, are vastly overblown. At the very least, an arms buyback policy cannot exacerbate the humanitarian situation, given that the militia already had an incentive to use coercive means due to the widely prevalent blackmarket. Furthermore, given the larger conflict that pervades Libya, policy designs should incorporate the ultimate aim of reducing fighting, the first step of which is reducing weapons concentration in Libya.

### **Alternatives**

To view this situation as a binary between arms buybacks and no arms buybacks would be imprudent. There are several other steps that can be taken, both in conjunction, and independent of missile capture schemes. Several steps have already been taken by governments across the world to reduce the weapon stockpile in Libya. In a notable effort, the U.S. is paying two European mine-clearing groups nearly \$1 million to hunt and dispose of loose anti-aircraft missiles that could make their way from Libyan battlefields to terror groups. The hiring of weapons demolition experts hardly dampens concerns about anti-aircraft missiles still in the hands of the Gaddafi regime's military, which amassed nearly 20,000 of the weapons before the popular uprising started in March.

Reducing the porosity of Libyan borders is another key challenge. In recent weeks, both Egypt and Yemen have halted shipments of missiles thought to have originated in Libya that were leaving for various conflict zones around the world. There is need for greater vigilance at checkpoints across the country in order to limit smuggling and trafficking of arms. There is also an acute need to address the massive undersupply of police and security personnel in Libya. One method of doing this that has been employed in other conflict zones is a policy of paying soldiers to defect. While the merits of this scheme are debatable, it cannot act as a substitute for recovering missiles. Non-recovery of missiles is not an option because of the wide proliferation of missiles all over the country. Recovery operations must additionally incorporate a buyback scheme because, while mere removal of missiles might have been an option in the presence of formal accounting mechanisms, the failure of Gaddafi's regime to maintain such measures severely harms the ability to track such missiles.

### **Response of Other Actors ?**

The NTC is thought to support such a policy. In September 2011, NTC envoy to Paris, Mansour Saif al-Nasr, said that there was a plan to buy back weapons once security was secured. The reality in Libya however, is that the inability of the NTC to recover weapons

is actually fuelling the conflict. Therefore, the need to reduce the number of weapons in Libya and neighboring territories is critical.

How the GCC will respond to any policy that aims at buying back missiles from Libya remains to be seen. Of the GCC states, Qatar has played by far the most active role in the Libyan uprising and post-Gaddafi Libya. Western intelligence agencies allege that Qatar has very close ties with Islamists, who now form a part of various militias scattered around the country. Indeed Qatar was responsible for arming Islamist rebels in the uprising against Gaddafi. Qatar's relationship with the NTC is uncertain; opinion is split within the NTC on whether Qatari should be welcomed or cautiously refused. The UAE too has been closely involved with attempting to rebuild Libya; recent rumors claim that Libya may procure the United Arab Emirates' 68 Mirage 2000 fighters once the UAE replaces them with Rafales. Furthermore, reports suggest that Qatar too is trying to sell its Mirage 2000s to Libya.



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The Qatari activity is of particular interest. It is hard to reconcile Qatar's slightly strained relationship with the NTC, coupled with their continued support of the Muslim Brotherhood and Sheik Yusuf Qaradawi with their recent actions that aim at mediating talks between the NTC and militias. Beyond the direct politics of the Qatar-NTC relationship, it still seems likely to see Qatar support an arms buyback deal, or at the very least, not actively oppose it. This can be attributed to two broad reasons – firstly, Qatar and other GCC states have been very economically active in Libya. In April 2012, Qatar was responsible for the purchase of the Bank of Commerce and Development; the UAE has been a leading advocate for rebuilding Libya via trade and has confirmed that it will contribute in building the Libyan economy and its trade and economic institutions, to help Libya to join the World Trade Organization, assist it to finish infrastructures and technology projects. Recently, the UAE-based Al Ghurair Group announced plans to invest \$1.5bn to expand a refinery in Libya over the next four years. In light of the newfound economic interests that the GCC, both individually and collectively have at stake in Libya, a quick end to the fighting in Libya is central to their interests – in order for the GCC to begin its investment into Libya, a continued atmosphere of stability is required.

The second reason is the close diplomatic alliances between the GCC and the U.S. The U.S. continues to maintain military bases in many GCC countries, and supplies many GCC countries strongly support U.S.-led campaign against international terrorism, providing assistance in the military, diplomatic, and intelligence arenas and also supporting efforts to block financing of terrorist groups. Many GCC countries also see their interests as being aligned to supporting the U.S. In light of that, it seems likely that the GCC will support any attempts made by the U.S. to recover weapons from Libya.

## **Conclusion**

Reigning in the illicit flow of arms in Libya is crucial to improving the security paradigm in Africa. While the impacts of implementing an arms buyback scheme are still up for question, the merits of it as a method of collecting both weapons themselves, and tracking information on the weapons themselves cannot be disputed. The strongest case for a weapons buyback scheme comes perhaps from the current state of loose missiles in Libya – given that these missiles will almost certainly be traded in some form of clandestine market, efforts targeted purely at gathering will be insufficient at preventing the exodus of arms to other volatile conflict-ridden regions. The relevant question then becomes the following – given that arms are likely to leave Libya, would we rather that the U.S. Government has possession of them or terrorist groups and militias? In light of the above, the rationale for a missiles buyback scheme becomes self-apparent; the scheme also carries with it the positive externality of reducing pressure on the beleaguered NTC government. If Libya is able to control its missing missile problem, the NTC would also earn the support of other major African nations; in light of coming elections in Libya, such support may be crucial in ensuring that the NTC maintains its threatened position at the helm of Libyan politics. A missile buyback scheme that mitigates the security threat posed by missiles (especially MANPADs) formerly in Gaddafi's arms caches would also be an integral part of tertiary programs targeted at tackling the porosity of Libyan borders. By eliminating perverse incentives for inefficient policing that exist under the arms black market system, it seems likely that more soldiers and armed individuals will be encouraged to defect to the government side, providing crucial reinforcements of personnel in the process. These defections - coupled with the retrieval and subsequent removal of arms from Libya - could also be crucial in helping alleviate the threat currently posed by numerous militia forces.

The complex security dynamic that has emerged in Libya over the last few months will not be solved purely by an arms buyback scheme. But an arms buyback scheme should nonetheless be a central component of any attempts made by foreign governments to stabilize the situation in Libya and an important first step to stem the dangerous spread of these weapons to other theaters.