The recent headline-grabbing attack on Libya’s National Oil Corp. (NOC) headquarters in Tripoli was a reminder of the underlying fragility of the country’s oil sector (EC Aug.10’18). Although it is unclear which militant group was responsible, some security consultants believe it bears the hallmarks of Islamic State, supposedly dealt a death blow in Sirte over 2016-17 by militias loyal to the UN-backed government of Prime Minister Fayez Serraj, with Western backing (EC Jun.24’16).

Whoever claims responsibility for the attack, which killed two NOC employees and left 25 injured, Islamic State remains active in Libya. “I am pretty sure it was [Islamic State] for various reasons. Mainly the tactics used — the use of southern Libyans in the attack and the focus on a high-profile target, but we also know they were conducting surveillance on targets in the capital — various ministry buildings — well ahead of the NOC attack,” says a former European defense attaché. Fezzan is Libya’s southern region.

Since its ousting from Sirte, Islamic State has dispersed across the country but primarily to southern Libya, seen as a base from which to launch attacks elsewhere, such as on oil and other critical infrastructure, as well as national and international oil company (IOC) personnel in far-flung areas. The El Sharara and Elephant oil fields in the southwest are within reach and mainly staffed by locally employed crews. “IOC personnel are easy prey for them but we can see them providing logistics to groups in Mali and Niger and as far as Nigeria. But they will not strike targets in Fezzan because they don’t want to be targeted there,” says the attaché. Fezzan is Libya’s southern region.

This latest attack most likely benefited from ongoing political and security chaos in the capital. A recent report to the UN Security Council by UN Libyan envoy Ghassan Salame said Tripoli’s most recent violence started on Aug. 27 and ended with a UN cease-fire on Sep. 4, a period during which 61 Libyans were killed, 159 were injured and hundreds of prisoners escaped from jails in the capital. Salame had warned that Libya may become a “shelter for terrorist groups.”

Vacuum-Packed

Militia groups and militants remain Libya’s perennial problem (EC Sep.21’12). “Islamic State is one more militia among many militias competing for resources, territory and recruits. [Islamic State] is a threat to Libya, but it’s not its primary challenge. Libya’s main problem is multiple political divisions that are manipulated by external actors and that create a vacuum for [Islamic State] to exploit,” says Haim Malka, deputy director of the Mideast program at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Fighting continues across Libya, says the UN. In the western town of Tawergha, displaced families were targeted by armed groups on Aug. 10. Islamic State claimed responsibility for an attack on the western town of Zliten, which killed four police officers on Aug. 23. But the growing threat is coming from the south. Here, Chadian government and opposition forces are taking advantage of Libya’s political and security chaos to fight one another, risking the south becoming a regional battleground, the UN warned. Chaos in the south is also allowing Islamic State to regroup.

Libya has long been identified as one of the most active Islamic State provinces, even before the fall of the jihadist group’s caliphate in Iraq and Syria (EC Oct.27’17). Serraj’s government, with US backing, tackled the group in Sirte in 2016 as it was attempting to carve out a mini-state again. The US has had advisers on the ground to coordinate the hundreds of airstrikes targeting Islamic State to keep it off balance, but despite US pressure, “thousands of foreign fighters have still flocked there,” writes Daniel Byman, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Brookings Institution.

Under US President Donald Trump, Washington is reluctant to become directly involved in the UN’s twin-track diplomatic and military process to solve the Libyan political crisis. “There is no appetite in Washington for any Libya policy beyond a military approach of containing Salafist groups and bombing [Islamic State] cells when they find them,” says Malka.

That leaves EU states most directly affected by Libya’s political implosion, which has created insecurity across North Africa and the Sahel, to craft a policy for Libya. Paris with UN support is pushing for elections later this year, as set out in its May summit on Libya, (continued on page 2)
LIBYA (continued from 1)

despite the security context (EC Jun.29’18). Italy’s main concern is the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean that Libya’s insecurity supports. Rome has proved willing to pursue its own objectives and intervene directly to pay militias and tribal leaders in the south and west (EC Sep.22’17).

Within the EU, calls for a more unified Libya policy seem to be emerging. The European Parliament’s European People’s Party (EPP) this month highlighted the failings of diverse EU policies on Libya. “Having several actors with different approaches will continue to destabilize the country further,” the EPP said, recommending instead that the EU back a joint military force of Libyans and other African states to tackle terrorism, control borders and target smugglers.

“I think it highly likely that national elections planned for this year may end up being perpetually postponed and, if this happens, the EU should consider a new approach and move an embassy back to Libya. But they will need to build up their credibility after the discrediting of the UN and Italy among Libya’s political leaders,” says the former defense attaché. ■

Tom Pepper, London

Compass Points:

• SIGNIFICANCE: Assumed defeated, jihadist groups such as Islamic State in Libya have proved resilient and remain a constant threat to the oil sector amid Libya’s ongoing political crisis.

• CONNECTION: Jihadist fighters preparing to flee Syria’s Idlib province and seeking a new base may see Libya as the best option.

• NEXT: The prospect of successful elections in December looks grim. A Sep. 16 deadline set by the Paris summit to adopt electoral laws and approve the constitutional basis for elections came and went this week.