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Putin's Risky Game of Chicken

By **FIONA HILL** and **STEVEN PIFER** JUNE 15, 2015

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WASHINGTON — Russian SU-24 fighter-bombers buzzed a U.S. Navy destroyer in international waters in the Black Sea late in May, just days after the Royal Air Force scrambled to intercept nuclear-capable Bear bombers near British airspace. These dangerous Russian games of chicken are now regular occurrences and come hard upon a Russian threat in March to aim nuclear missiles at Danish warships if Denmark joins NATO's missile defense system.

As tensions between the West and Moscow sharpen over Ukraine, NATO countries have seen a dramatic spike in provocative actions that risk a harrowing accident or devastating miscalculation. A NATO-Russia military-to-military dialogue would reduce these risks — if President Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin allow it.

NATO has ratcheted down its political dialogue with Moscow in protest over Russia's illegal seizure of Crimea and involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine. But the alliance should seek to engage Russia on a professional military level to minimize the danger of missteps or misunderstandings when their forces operate in close proximity or near each other's territory. They would have good antecedents to draw on: a set

of Cold War agreements whose titles clearly convey their purposes.

Neither NATO nor Russia would want a miscalculation — say, a NATO fighter misreading a Russian plane's actions and shooting it down — that could lead inadvertently to a larger armed clash. An agreement could set down rules on how to approach an aircraft or ship, and whom to call in the case of an uncertain situation. Such measures could and should become part of standard operating procedures.

In the 1960s, encounters between the U.S. and Soviet navies became similarly dangerous. Soviet intelligence trawlers maneuvered to interfere with U.S. aircraft carriers conducting flight operations in the Mediterranean Sea. U.S. pilots buzzed Soviet ships — sometimes at high speed and so low that the shock wave blew crewmen overboard. In 1972, the United States and Soviet Union concluded the Prevention of Incidents at Sea Agreement to curb these kinds of occurrences. Russian reconnaissance flights were given minimum standoff distances and altitudes when flying near U.S. warships, and U.S. pilots had rules for intercepting and escorting Russian aircraft in a nonthreatening manner. U.S. and Soviet naval officers periodically met to review and discuss cases where the procedures had been violated.

The early 1980s saw a new phase of escalatory encounters, including the interception and shooting down of a Korean Air Lines passenger plane by a Soviet fighter near Sakhalin Island after the Soviets mistook it for a U.S. spy plane operating in their airspace. And, in 1983, a large-scale NATO nuclear forces exercise, coming just as U.S. Pershing missile deployments were about to begin in Europe, generated a full-blown war scare in Moscow that some historians consider as serious as the Cuban Missile Crisis.

As part of efforts to reduce tensions, Washington and Moscow concluded the Dangerous Military Activities Agreement in 1989. This was designed to avert hazardous or ambiguous situations between U.S. and Soviet ground forces along the inner-German border while Germany was still divided. Among other provisions, U.S. and Soviet units at the tactical level were given radio frequencies, so in the event of possible misunderstanding during an exercise or routine movement of forces they could talk directly to sort things out.

These agreements remain in force, but they apply only to the United States and Russia. Russia has similar bilateral agreements with other NATO

members, but the current situation demands that similar arrangements be worked out to cover all NATO and Russian military forces operating in Europe and the North Atlantic area. It would also be wise to update the arrangements as they are negotiated. Senior NATO and Russian officers are best suited to conduct this dialogue. The NATO defense ministers meeting set for June 24-25 offers an opportunity to explore this idea.

What is not clear is whether Mr. Putin and the Kremlin would welcome this step. Mr. Putin presents himself as acting to protect his country and its independence. Russian officials have created a narrative in which the West seeks to overthrow the Putin regime by supporting Russian opposition movements, ruining the economy with sanctions, and rolling Russia back from dominance in its traditional neighborhood through the expansion of NATO and European Union institutional arrangements. Mr. Putin's domestic popularity has become entwined with the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine.

This provides the backdrop for the more aggressive and seemingly irresponsible Russian military operations, like the SU-24 and Bear flights. Last year, an SAS airliner carrying more than 130 passengers narrowly averted a mid-air collision with a Russian military aircraft that had shut down its transponder and thus did not show on the radar of civilian air traffic controllers.

Mr. Putin and other senior officials have deliberately employed bellicose

rhetoric, even threatening the nuclear card. They appear to have taken a page from Thomas Schelling's famous work on conflict behavior. They act a bit crazy in a way intended to intimidate NATO and the European Union. They resort to warmongering to convince the West that they are prepared to take greater risks.

In spite of the saber-rattling, Mr. Putin and the Kremlin do not want war with NATO. Mr. Putin is not hell-bent on the destruction of Russia or his presidency in a nuclear exchange. But Russian security elites know they lack the economic and military resources for a major conventional conflict, so Moscow has to accomplish its goals without triggering total mobilization — through hybrid tactics and bullying, including threats of a nuclear strike.

And here lies the problem. Limiting the risks of miscalculation between NATO and Russian military units would seem to be a no-brainer. No one wants an accidental war. But, given Mr. Putin's desire to intimidate the West, would the Kremlin permit such a dialogue to go forward?

Fiona Hill and Steven Pifer are senior fellows at the Brookings Institution.

Italy threatens to give Schengen visas to migrants as EU dispute deepens

Frustrated at infighting over sharing the migrant burden, Rome says it will issue temporary visas allowing travel beyond Italy if an equitable deal is not reached

Migrants make their message clear in the Italian town of Ventimiglia on the border with France.
Photograph: Luca Zennaro/EPA

Ian Traynor in Brussels

Monday 15 June 2015 18.01 BST

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[Europe](#) is embroiled in a worsening feud over how to cope with mass migration across the Mediterranean from Libya, with Italy threatening to issue migrants with temporary visas that would allow them to enter other EU countries if no equitable deal is struck to share the burden.

Brussels is struggling to effect a new quota system for migrants, and EU interior ministers are due to meet in Luxembourg on Tuesday to try to hammer out a response to controversial proposals from the European Commission that amount to the beginnings of a coherent and shared immigration policy.

With tens of thousands of migrants crossing the Mediterranean, most of them heading for [Italy](#), Rome appears outraged at the European infighting and is threatening to retaliate.

East European states reject the commission's proposals, Britain and Denmark are opting out; Germany supports them; France, Spain and Portugal are lukewarm; and Italy is furious that it may be left to deal with the influx on its southern shores.

The Italian prime minister, Matteo Renzi, said that if no equitable deal is struck to share the burden, Rome would start issuing migrants with temporary visas allowing them to travel elsewhere in Europe, stop receiving the hundreds of boats arriving from [Libya](#) and refuse docking for foreign ships rescuing those stranded at sea.

Austria and Hungary are threatening to close their borders to migrants, and France and Switzerland are refusing them entry from Italy. Police are patrolling international rail traffic, flouting the passport-free travel rules governing Europe's Schengen area.



“It’s not looking good,” an EU official said on Monday ahead of the interior ministers’ session.

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We will hurt EU if migrant crisis is not fixed, says Italian PM Matteo Renzi

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The EU is staging special events this week to celebrate 30 years of borderless travel in the Schengen area. Leaders have declared the system irreversible, but it has seldom appeared under greater strain.

Reacting to the drowning of more than 800 migrants when their boat capsized in the Mediterranean in April, the European Commission delivered radical new proposals last month on quotas for migrants to spread across the EU. Britain, Denmark and Ireland do not need to take part in the scheme under the special EU terms they enjoy, but Dublin has said it will take some in.

The commission’s proposals would start modestly, calling for the distribution across the EU of 60,000 Syrian and Eritrean asylum-seekers, 40,000 already in Italy and Greece and 20,000 still to make the Mediterranean crossing.

The figures have been criticised as risibly low - more than 600,000 asylum-seekers entered the EU last year - but the commission’s scheme would establish the principle of a shared burden across the EU for the first time.

Almost 60,000 have already arrived in southern Italy so far this year, more than the equivalent figure for last year. The proposals would redistribute 24,000 from Italy to other countries. Renzi described the figure as a provocation.

Under the commission proposals, the redistribution of migrants would be binding on 25 of the 28 EU member states. The newer EU countries of eastern Europe, with low immigrant populations, do not want to take part and insist any redistribution should be voluntary rather than mandatory.

Italy, Germany, Austria and Sweden are the foremost supporters of quotas, but to be accepted, they need to be backed by a qualified majority of countries. The east

European members do not have enough support to block the proposals, but would be able to veto if Spain and Portugal joined them. Officials in Brussels said Poland, the biggest of the newer eastern members, was the key country.

The issue is unlikely to be decided on Tuesday, but will be taken up by an EU leaders' summit next week in Brussels. The east European countries are keen to renew economic sanctions against Russia over Ukraine, an issue that resonates less strongly in western Europe, and Poland could be persuaded to bend on immigration in return for support on Russia, officials said.

Germany and France have adopted a joint position, criticising but not rejecting the commission's quota scheme while setting conditions such as the freezing of visa waiver schemes for the countries of the Balkans, and insisting that Italy fingerprint and register all new arrivals to keep them from travelling north to other EU countries.

Under EU rules, migrants need to lodge their asylum claim in the first EU country they enter. Italy is demanding changes to the system, but France and Germany stress that it should be left alone.

Processing camps in Libya: is this Italy's Plan B?

15 GIUGNO 2015 BY ANDREA SPADA



Italy said it will ask the EU to set up refugee processing camps in Libya, and threatened to 'hurt' Europe should it turn a deaf ear to the crisis on its shores.

The country is struggling to accommodate an endless wave of boat migrants, and a crackdown on security at the borders with France and Austria has exacerbated the situation, causing a bottleneck at Italy's train stations.

The crisis "should not be underestimated", Prime Minister Matteo Renzi said, as Austria, France and Switzerland expelled asylum seekers back onto Italian soil.

"Let me be clear, Europe's answers so far have not been good enough," Renzi added.

The EU is having difficulty achieving consensus for its proposed migrant distribution plan — under which 24,000 refugees would be taken in by other countries — but Italy is hoping an EU summit on June 25-26 will go even further.

"Redistributing just 24,000 people is almost a provocation," Renzi said.

"If Europe chooses solidarity, good. If it doesn't, we have Plan B ready. But it would first and foremost hurt Europe," he said, without providing details.

Renzi has come under pressure to take a stronger stance with the 28-member bloc, with the anti-establishment Five Star movement suggesting Italy threaten to freeze its EU budget contributions if aid is not forthcoming.

– Secret Plan B –

“I cannot reveal our Plan B,” Interior Minister Angelino Alfano told Sky TG24, “but if Europe is not supportive, it will find itself dealing with a different Italy. We will not accept a selfish Europe.”

Alfano said he would ask the EU at a meeting of interior ministers on Tuesday for “fair distribution of migrants, camps in Libya and a serious policy on repatriation” of economic migrants.

Any such plan for camps would hinge on Libya’s opposing factions reaching a political agreement, or Italy convincing the UN to adopt a resolution.

Over 57,000 migrants and asylum seekers have been rescued at sea and brought to Italy so far this year — up from 54,000 at the same time last year — Renzi said, and Rome wants both a long-term solution and help from other countries now.

It wants the EU to forge repatriation deals with African nations and share the cost of returning home would-be economic migrants, who currently make up around 60 percent of those arriving by boat.

Renzi will raise the issue with his British and French counterparts when they travel to Milan this week, as well as speaking to European Commission head Jean-Claude Juncker and German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Under the Dublin convention, refugees must apply for asylum in the first country of entry to Europe — a rule which Italy says is unfair as it leaves Rome to deal with the thousands of migrants washing up on its shores.

Greece has also long complained of being left with the same problem.

The Dublin convention “should be changed,” Renzi said, insisting the current chaos in Libya — from where many of the boats depart — is “Europe’s responsibility in light of the (military) intervention four years ago” by NATO to help rebels unseat dictator Moamer Kadhafi.

The Schengen open borders accord has until now meant those landing in Italy can usually easily travel through neighbouring France, Austria, Switzerland and Slovenia as they seek to make it to Britain, Germany and Scandinavia.

But border controls were temporarily reintroduced by Germany last week ahead of hosting the G7 summit.

A subsequent tightening of the frontier at the French-Italian border as well, where police have refused entry to people hoping to head to northern Europe, has sparked migrant protests.

– Austria, France, Switzerland repel –

Some of the men, women and children from Somalia, Eritrea, the Ivory Coast and Sudan said they had

initially made it across the border into France by train, but been arrested and escorted back across the frontier by police.

Austrian police also announced Sunday they would be returning to Italy 24 African migrants arrested while trying to get to Germany by train.

In Switzerland, border police spokesman Attila Lardori said 240 migrants were expelled back to Italy over the weekend, adding that officers on average round up between 30 and 50 migrants a day on trains crossing between Italy and France.

The standoff at Ventimiglia on the border with France raised particular concern in Italy, with the anti-establishment Five Star movement saying "Paris is treating migrants like parcels to return to sender: it's shameful."

The crackdown has increased pressure on Italy's already overcrowded reception facilities, with hundreds of people sleeping rough in the main train stations in Rome and Milan.

As television images showed yet more arrivals by sea, authorities in Milan rushed to convert a warehouse into a centre, while in Rome the civil protection agency set up a temporary tent camp.

Migrants sporting scars from wounds suffered in conflict-hit homelands or lawless Libya were tended to by the Red Cross.

Around 1,800 people have drowned attempting the crossing so far this year, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

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Mali, Libya crises to top agenda as Hollande visits Algeria

#Diplomacy (<http://www.middleeasteye.net/topics/diplomacy>)

Mutual concern over the growth of militant groups in north Africa has trumped previous tensions between Paris and Algiers



French President Francois Hollande (C) arrives to lay a wreath of flowers at the Martyr's Shrine in Algiers, on 15 June, 2015 (AFP)



AFP (<http://www.middleeasteye.net/users/afp>)
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French President Francois Hollande heads to Algeria on Monday as the two nations, once bitter foes, work ever closer to resolve the political turmoil and militant threat in Mali and Libya.

The trip will be Hollande's second to Algiers since a 2012 visit during which he recognised France's century of "brutal" rule over the Algerian people which ended in a bloody independence war.

While some prickly issues remain between the two countries - such as Hollande's refusal to apologise for crimes under colonial rule - the mutual concern over the growth of militant groups in north Africa has taken the upper hand.

Algeria shares a border with Mali's north, which is still fragile after a French-led operation in 2013 ousted militants who had seized the upper half of the west African nation.

While French troops patrol northern Mali, Algiers has mediated a peace accord between Mali's main Tuareg-led rebel groups and Bamako which will be signed on 20 June and is aimed at bringing some stability to the region.

Algeria has also hosted talks between rival political factions from chaos-torn Libya - with which it also shares a long border.

The energy-rich north African nation is eager to see peace in its neighbourhood, and with France running counter-terrorism Operation Barkhane in five countries in the Sahel region - three of which border Algeria - Hollande and his Algerian counterpart will have plenty to discuss.

The French leader will hold talks with President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal on his visit.

"Clearly, for France, security issues have taken the upper hand," said Pierre Vermeren, a specialist on the Maghreb region.

"Algeria is also one of the main actors in stabilising the situation in Libya along with the UN, and obviously France is counting on its capacity for mediation," he said.

Ties 'unrivalled'

The defrosting of ties between Paris and Algiers in recent years comes half-a-century after French forces brutally cracked down on Algerians fighting for independence in a 1954-62 war that left some 1.5 million Algerians dead.

The topic has remained a deep wound between the countries who - despite their troubled past - remain closely linked with more than half a million Algerians living in France.

However, French ambassador to Algiers Bernard Emie recently said that Bouteflika described the current relations with Paris as "unrivalled".

Algeria is still dealing with the fallout from a civil war in the 1990s in which tens of thousands died.

During the war, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat which later became an al-Qaeda affiliate was born. It went on to carry out attacks and kidnappings both in Algeria and across the border in Mali and Mauritania.

The group, now known as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) played a key role in the takeover of northern Mali in 2012.

Politically, Paris steers clear of commenting on 78-year-old Bouteflika's ill-health and the accusations his recent re-election for a fourth term was riddled with fraud.

France - whose economy is sorely in need of a boost - is also keen to win back the title of Algeria's main trade partner, which China won in 2013.

Why talking with the wrong Libyans won't help

Brian Klaas / 16 June 2015

Now is the time to play diplomatic hardball; when the Thursday deadline for an agreement passes, the civil war is likely to intensify.

In today's world, internationally recognised governments do not always control their countries. Libya, which is embroiled in a multipolar civil war, is one tragic example.

Rival administrations — one in Tobruk, one in Tripoli — claim to be legitimate nationwide rulers even though neither actually governs the splinters of territory it claims to control. The real power lies with militia commanders and local councils.

All efforts to broker peace have failed. The Tobruk-based administration - having grown spoiled by a surfeit of international support - walked away from United Nations-sponsored negotiations last week, flatly rejecting the latest attempt at a power-sharing plan. Its leaders have hinted that they will resort to a military solution if a political one fails.

Now is the time to play diplomatic hardball; when the Thursday deadline for an agreement passes, the civil war is likely to intensify.

This chaos is dangerous, but not only for Libya. Since late May, Daesh has been on the march — taking over a key airport, overrunning a military base and accepting the surrender of various tribal groups in central coastal Libya. And every day, barely seaworthy boats depart with human cargo toward Europe from Libya's coastline, which has become an unpatrolled, lawless sieve.

This smuggling of migrants (and, occasionally drugs and jihadists too) is lucrative. It enriches and empowers criminal and militia groups in Libya, which have no incentives to build peace but plenty to prolong the low-level civil war.

Libya's further collapse is a pressing threat to Western security. But so far, all internationally led diplomatic efforts to stabilize the country have been doomed because they are guided by a narrow anti-Islamist and counterterror ideology.

The political logjam has not been broken because Western diplomacy remains focused on who we want to have in power rather than who actually wields it.

In law enforcement, when hostage negotiators attempt to stave off tragedy, they talk to whoever is holding the hostages, not his distant cousin 500 miles away. Yet Western negotiators in Libya have ignored this approach.

The two biggest threats to Western security in Libya are ISIS and the endless flow of migrants, including some jihadists, toward Europe. Both of these threats are centered around Tripoli and west-central Libya. The Tripoli-based administration, and its coalition partner in Misrata - Libya's third largest city - have the ability to restrain ISIS's recruitment efforts and military advance.

The United States and its Western allies urgently need to engage the power blocs and militia commanders that could actually make a meaningful difference in forging a lasting peace. Instead, the West insists on recognizing and engaging predominantly with the Tobruk-based administration in the East - which has little to no control over what happens in most of the country - especially in

the areas from which migrants are departing.

The Tobruk-based House of Representatives currently enjoys the perception of being Libya's sole internationally legitimate authority. That's because it is, unlike the Tripoli-based administration, largely anti-Islamist - a key asset in a world where Western powers typically back anti-Islamists; despite the policy's tendency to repeatedly backfire, it remains the prevailing dogma in Brussels, London and Washington. Moreover, the Tobruk-based faction won deeply flawed elections last June, prompting Western diplomats to erroneously assume that it had genuine democratic legitimacy.

For far too long, the Tobruk administration has convinced the United Nations and Western powers to keep Tripoli and its coalition of supporters out in the diplomatic cold. Just last week, Tobruk officials insisted they would reject any plan to stop the flow of migrant boats if European negotiators engaged with any other power brokers, including the local militias who have de facto control of the coastlines in question.

At least Col. Muammar Gaddafi, the deposed dictator of Libya, could actually control events. He would encourage migrants to sail north and then demand diplomatic concessions from Europe. As soon as his demands were met, the migrant flows miraculously stopped.

Gaddafi's successors in Tobruk and Tripoli are attempting to mimic him. The Tobruk-based faction boasts that it can secure Libya, defeat Daesh and stem the flow of migrants - in exchange for strong Western backing and the lead position in a power-sharing unity government. The Tripoli-based faction does the same, using its more-credible leverage against ISIS and migrant flows to squeeze Europe into legitimizing the gains it has made by brute force. Neither side is likely to live up to its boasting.

To end these charades and bring peace, Western policy in Libya must change radically. If this round of negotiations fails to lead to a successful national unity government, then neither Tobruk nor Tripoli should enjoy international legitimacy or recognition. The mandate from the flawed election that gave the Tobruk faction an edge is set to expire in October; after that, Tobruk should not be put on a diplomatic pedestal.

International recognition is a precious commodity that, when revoked, can catalyse sparring groups to find common ground. Giving one preferential treatment to the detriment of the other will damage Libyan politics for decades to come.

By withholding international recognition, cutting access to the international banking system and applying a raft of multilateral sanctions against disruptive actors - on all sides - the West could begin to remove roadblocks to peace.

But ultimately, Europe and America will have to engage directly with the militias, especially the powerful Misratan bloc, which can actually contain jihadists and flow of migrants. If they do not, Libya will remain paralysed by political stalemate, drenched in the blood spilled by ISIS and haunted by the ghosts of helpless migrants drowning on Europe's doorstep.

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Abdelkader Abdulla @Bama_Correspondent · 2h

The euphoria in Derna was captured in this Twitter image which was widely circulated after ISIL was expelled from the town. Libyans dumped the militant group's black flag from buildings and flyovers, replacing them with the Libyan tricolor.

In Libya, a popular uprising pushes ISIL out of Derna

John Pearson
Foreign Correspondent

June 15, 2015 Updated: June 15, 2015 10:57 PM

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Derna, the sleepy town

Geveva // A popular uprising in the Libyan port of Derna over the weekend has achieved the previously unthinkable – the expulsion of ISIL brigades who had been holding the town.

Protests and fighting triggered by the public execution of a popular local postman spiralled into an uprising that has seen a rare reverse for the extremist group that had been gaining ground across Libya.

Derna's celebrations may be short-lived because the militia spearheading the fighting, and now claiming control of the town, is an Al Qaeda affiliate, the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade.

But for the moment Derna is locked in euphoria with one image above all flooding social media - crowds of citizens dumping ISIL's black flag from buildings and flyovers and replacing it with the Libyan tricolor.

Protests against ISIL's public executions in the 12 months since it established its rule in Derna began on Friday and demonstrators came under fire from its units in the town centre.

Later that day, the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade, named after 1,200 prisoners

massacred by former dictator Muammar Qaddafi in a Tripoli prison of the same name in 1996, led attacks on the ISIL-held police headquarters.

As fighting intensified on Saturday, three ISIL suicide bombers blew themselves up in a desperate attempt to fight back, with battles raging from street to street.

Government airstrikes then hit ISIL positions, and fighting that day saw 25 people reported killed. It was unclear how many of these were ISIL fighters.

On Sunday, Abu Salim Martyrs leaders proclaimed the town was under their control. ISIL, their bases overrun, fled for the forested hills of the Green Mountains.

Meanwhile, forces from the internationally recognised government, which is based in Tobruk, are pushing towards the town from the east, attacking an ISIL base at Ras Al Hilal, 45 kilometres from Derna.

Local militiamen and police have now captured more than 150 ISIL fighters, made up of Libyans and foreigners, parading them in trucks around the town centre.

It marks a dramatic reversal of fortune for ISIL, whose growth in Libya had until then seemed unstoppable.

Derna, a town of 150,000 on Libya's eastern coast, has long been a centre of Islamic learning, but it has also produced powerful militant groups.

In the 1990s they formed the backbone of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group in a failed uprising against Qaddafi. Crushed, the group's members fled, some to Afghanistan and Iraq.

In 2006, US forces in Iraq captured a list of names and home towns of Al Qaeda foreign fighters. The list showed that [no town of its size in the world contributed more](#) of those fighters than Derna.

After the 2011 revolution that ousted Qaddafi, extremist brigades tussled for influence in the town, with Abu Salim Martyrs fighting occasional battles with rival brigade Ansar Al Sharia, blamed by Washington for the [killing of US ambassador Christopher Stevens](#) in Benghazi in 2011.

Last summer, both Abu Salim Martyrs and Ansar Al Sharia were brushed aside by the arrival of ISIL, which brought 300 battle-hardened fighters from its Al Battar Brigade which fought in Syria. Many Ansar Al Sharia fighters defected to ISIL.

ISIL installed a Yemeni preacher, Abu Nabil Al Anbari, to supervise executions. His whereabouts since the fighting are not known.

ISIL established dominance in the town, and began holding public executions in the city sports stadium.

From Derna, ISIL spread down the coast to Sirte and in November they claimed responsibility for car bombings at the already abandoned UAE and Egyptian embassies in Tripoli.

In January, ISIL killed nine people in a suicide attack on a Tripoli hotel, followed by the gruesome execution of 21 Christian foreign workers, 20 from Egypt, dressed in orange jump suits near Sirte.

The extremists fanned out from Sirte to capture oil fields in the Sirte basin in March, [kidnapping nine foreign oil workers](#). Seven of them are still missing after two Bangladeshis were released.

With its capture this month of Sirte's air base, ISIL seemed poised to open oil-smuggling routes to Libya's unguarded southern border.

However, they have failed to win over Libyans.

There was popular outrage over a February triple-suicide car bombing that killed 35 civilians at Qubba, south of Derna, and further anger when ISIL crucified eight members of a Derna family in April.

To date, ISIL has taken advantage of Libya's civil war, with the forces of the country's two rival governments preoccupied with fighting each other.

Diplomats hope that a UN peace plan, unveiled earlier this month, may bring the warring governments together.

"They need to form a common front against ISIL," said one western diplomat.

Perhaps just as important in combating ISIL, from the evidence of events in Derna, may be people power.

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Kurds and Syrian Rebels Storm ISIS-Held Border Town

By **BEN HUBBARD** and **MAHER SAMAAAN** JUNE 15, 2015

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Kurdish militias and Arab rebels gathered Monday at an entrance to Tal Abyad, Syria, a strategic town bordering Turkey. Rodi Said/Reuters

ISTANBUL — A coalition of Kurdish militias and Arab rebels stormed into a strategic Syrian town on the [Turkey](#) border on Monday, seizing most of it from Islamic State fighters who had long used the area to smuggle supplies and fighters into their self-declared caliphate, according to Kurdish militia leaders and activists.

The complete loss of the town, Tal Abyad, would deal a major blow to the jihadists by cutting the primary lifeline to the Syrian city of Raqqa, which the Islamic State has ruled for more than a year and has tried to turn into a

model of strict Islamic governance.

The advance was a boost to opposition fighters who have watched in dismay as the Islamic State has grown, taking over resources and waging deadly battles against their communities. Control of Tal Abyad also would help create a contiguous slice of Kurdish-held territory adjoining Turkey.

“This is a very important victory for the Kurds because it will nourish the area economically,” said Saleh Muslim, a Kurdish activist, shouting on the phone from the area near the battle to make himself heard over the chants of celebrating militiamen. “Fuel and other goods will be available for the areas that were besieged before.”



Obama's Evolution on ISIS

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The opposition's attack, helped from heavy airstrikes by the United States-led military coalition that is bombing the Islamic State, was surprisingly swift, especially since recent victories by the jihadists in [Iraq](#) and [Syria](#) had suggested that months of airstrikes had done little to blunt the Islamic State's military prowess.

But on Monday, The Associated Press quoted Redur Khalil, a Kurdish militia spokesman, as saying that his group had entered Tal Abyad from the east and was advancing westward against small pockets of resistance from the Islamic State.

By Monday evening, activists were posting videos online of [men running through the town with Syrian opposition flags](#) and distributing images of [celebrating fighters](#) inside the border crossing. It was not immediately clear how many of the jihadists who had ruled the town remained, had been killed or had fled elsewhere as the opposition approached. Images said to show [Islamic State fighters surrendering to Turkish soldiers](#) circulated on social media.

The airstrikes, combined with ground battles between advancing

opposition fighters and the jihadists, had terrified civilians in recent days, and thousands of them [streamed across the border into Turkey](#), ripping holes in the border fence to make way for women and children.

The fighting near Tal Abyad illustrated the complexity of the local and international alliances that have evolved during more than four years of war in [Syria](#).

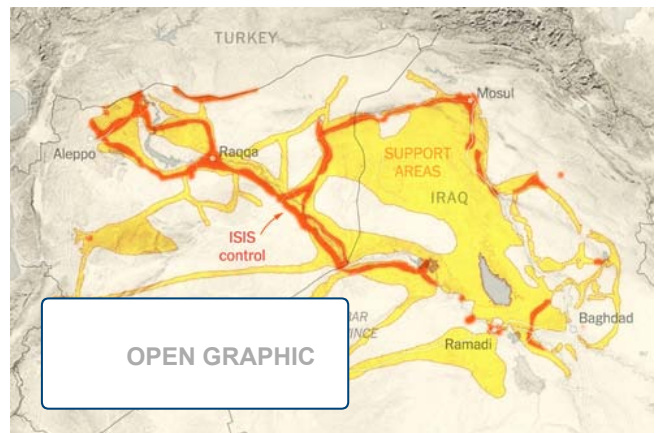
Driving the battle on the ground were Kurdish militias that have used the weakening of the Syrian state to carve out greater autonomy for themselves in their areas along the Turkish border. Their seizure of Tal Abyad will further advance that cause by connecting Kurdish territories previously separated by the jihadists.

They were joined by Arab rebel groups that formed with the goal of ousting President Bashar al-Assad of Syria but have found themselves also fighting the Islamic State, also known as [ISIS](#) or ISIL, which has exploited the chaos in Iraq and Syria to seize territory for the creation of its own state.

GRAPHIC

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The United States-led military coalition appeared to have created the opportunity for the advance of the opposition forces by repeatedly bombing Islamic State targets in the area in recent days.

But the new battle on the Turkish border once again laid bare the divisions between Turkey's leadership and the coalition. As displaced Syrians massed near the border over the weekend, journalists [captured images of armed Islamic State fighters moving among them unmolested](#), often within eyeshot of Turkish soldiers.

Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has accused the coalition of bombing Turkmens and Arabs, empowering Kurdish groups that Turkey

considers terrorists near its border.

The airstrikes “could lead to the creation of a structure that threatens our borders,” Mr. Erdogan said, according to Agence France-Presse. “Everyone needs to take into account our sensitivities on this issue.”

The main Kurdish militia fighting in the area, known as the Democratic Union Party, or P.Y.D., is an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or P.K.K., which has waged a 30-year insurgency against the Turkish state.

Mr. Erdogan repeatedly raised concerns about Kurdish advances on Tal Abyad in comments carried by Turkish media, saying that Kurdish self-rule near the Turkish border was a security threat.

Pro-government media in Turkey reported that the refugee influx was caused by coalition airstrikes and that some had caused civilian casualties.



Graphic: The Global Struggle to Respond to the Worst Refugee Crisis in Generations

The American Embassy in Ankara, the Turkish capital, responded on Monday, saying on [Twitter](#), “contrary to insinuations from some in the media, the coalition works hard to ensure civilians are not hit in airstrikes.”

The embassy also said, in [another Twitter message](#), that “civilian outflows from Tal al-Abyad are the result of people fleeing

fighting brought about by #ISIL.”

The tensions were similar to those during an Islamic State offensive last fall on the Syrian Kurdish town of [Kobani](#), also on the Turkish border. That attack caused a humanitarian crisis, and the coalition carried out some of the most intense airstrikes of its entire campaign against the Islamic State, reportedly killing more than 1,000 Islamic State fighters before the jihadists abandoned the assault.

Turkey, meanwhile, positioned tanks on the border but did not intervene, appearing more concerned with the prospect of an autonomous Kurdish enclave on its border than with the Islamic State’s taking the town.

Turkey, which already hosts nearly two million Syrian refugees, has struggled to confront the recent flood of civilians fleeing the fighting near Tal Abyad. The border crossing has been closed periodically, and clusters of desperate refugees have gathered near the crossing, at one point breaking a hole in the border fence.

At times, the Turkish soldiers at the border have fired water cannons and warning shots to control the refugee crowds.

The Turks opened the gate on Sunday, and nearly 3,000 Syrians have since crossed, according to the semiofficial Anadolu Agency. Before Sunday, at least 15,000 Syrians fleeing the fighting in the area had entered Turkey over the last week, according to Turkish news outlets.

Throughout the war in Syria, Turkey has faced allegations that [lax controls along its long border with Syria](#) abetted the rise of extremist groups like the Nusra Front and the Islamic State.

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World

Islamic State routed from stronghold

By **Liz Sly** June 15 at 5:18 PM

BEIRUT — The Islamic State was routed Monday from one of its key strongholds on Syria's border with Turkey after its defenses crumbled and its fighters either defected or fled, raising new questions about the group's vaunted military capabilities.

The fall of the town of Tal Abyad to a Kurdish-Syrian rebel force backed by U.S. airstrikes came after just two days of fighting during which the militants appeared to put up little resistance, focusing instead on escaping to their nearby self-styled capital of Raqqa or fleeing across the border to Turkey.

The force — led by Kurdish units of the People's Protection Units, or YPG, and including local battalions of the rebel Free Syrian Army — pulled the Islamic State flag down from the border crossing with Turkey on Monday and by nightfall said it was in control of the town center.

There were reports of scattered fighting on the western outskirts of Tal Abyad, but the advancing force had already severed the militants' escape route, closing in on the town Sunday in a pincer movement from the east, south and west.

It appeared the Islamic State had suffered a stunning defeat, its first major reversal since it was driven out of the Iraqi city of Tikrit in April, and one that could prove far more consequential. Tal Abyad commands the major trade and smuggling routes on which the Islamic State has relied for its supplies from the outside world and, most significant, the flow of foreign fighters to Raqqa, the first major city it conquered.

If the Kurdish-led force consolidates its hold over Tal Abyad, "it will be a major setback for the Islamic State and a major strategic victory," said Jennifer Cafarella of the Washington-based Institute for the Study of War.

The militants may be planning a counteroffensive, "and it will be interesting to see what they do in the coming week," she added.

But there were also signs that at least some Islamic State fighters had simply given up.

Photographs posted on social media by local activists showed groups of Islamic State fighters surrendering to Turkish forces and being led away after fleeing across the border. Syrians who had fought with the Islamic State were among more than 10,000 refugees who scrambled across the border in recent days to escape the battles, according to a Syrian aid worker who said he had been contacted by several seeking assistance.

More than 500 local residents who had joined the Islamic State defected to the advancing force, which includes Syrian rebel units driven out of the area after losing battles to the militants in 2013, he said.

The speed of the collapse was unexpected and suggests that the Islamic State has shifted its tactics since its ill-fated assault last September on the far less significant border town of Kobane, which it had been poised to overrun until the U.S.-led coalition created to confront the Islamic State intervened with airstrikes.

Even after it had become clear that its efforts to control Kobane had failed, the Islamic State stood its ground, clinging to its positions around the town, enduring wave after wave of airstrikes and suffering what U.S. and Kurdish officials say were thousands of casualties.

In the case of Tal Abyad, the Islamic State appears to have chosen to regroup rather than stand and fight. Convoys of fighters headed south to Raqqa over the weekend, some of them carrying medical equipment from Tal Abyad's hospitals and stocks of flour from its silos, according to the activist network Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently.

On Monday, the militants were digging trenches to the north of their capital in a sign that they are planning to entrench there, the network reported.

The battle for Tal Abyad represented an extension of the fight for Kobane, with Kurdish forces continuing to press east after they ejected the militants from their town in January. They have since linked up with more Free Syrian Army battalions as they pressed deep into the Islamic State's home turf of Raqqa, uniting under a coalition known as Burkan al-Furat, or Euphrates Volcano.

There are concerns, however, that the alliance between the Kurdish YPG and the Syrian Arab rebel units may fray now that they are conquering territories with a majority-Arab population.

The capture of Tal Abyad represents a major boost for the region's Kurds, giving them control of a contiguous stretch of territory from the Iranian border with Iraq to the heart of Syria.

Liz Sly is the Post's Beirut bureau chief. She has spent more than 15 years covering the Middle East, including the Iraq war. Other postings include Africa, China and Afghanistan.

No. 2 Qaeda Leader May Have Died in U.S. Airstrike in Yemen

By SCOTT SHANE JUNE 15, 2015

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WASHINGTON — Yemeni officials and extremists reported on Monday that the leader of [Al Qaeda](#)'s Yemen affiliate and recently the second-ranking official of the global terror network, Nasser al-Wuhayshi, had been killed in an American drone strike. American officials said they could not confirm the reports but were investigating.

Mr. Wuhayshi, 38, had led Qaeda operations in Yemen since 2002 and built Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula into what counterterrorism officials considered the most dangerous group targeting the United States homeland, though all of its attacks failed. The group was responsible for dispatching two underwear bombers — one bomb fizzled, and the other bomber was a double agent — to blow up airliners over American soil, and for planting explosives in printer cartridges aboard two commercial cargo planes bound for Chicago.

It was the second time in two days that the fate of a militant leader targeted in an American strike was uncertain. Over the weekend, American F-15s carried out an airstrike in [Libya](#) on Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a leading Algerian terrorist, but by Monday his death remained very much in doubt.

The uncertainty about whether Mr. Wuhayshi and Mr. Belmokhtar were dead underscored a

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recurring lesson from the Obama administration's campaign of targeted killing of suspected terrorists: Even with multiple sources of intelligence, it is hard to be sure whom the missiles have hit in remote areas thousands of miles from the United States.

And although American counterterrorism officials would consider the deaths of the two men a major victory, the strikes in both countries took place as anti-American extremists are advancing and government authority is dissolving.

In Yemen, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, a Sunni extremist group, has been strengthened by the support of Sunni tribesmen as much of the country has been taken over by a Shiite militia known as the Houthis. Qaeda militants now control more territory than at any time since 2012.

In Libya, factional fighting since the ouster and death in 2011 of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, the longtime dictator, has permitted multiple militant groups to seize territory and recruit supporters, including affiliates of both Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL.

"The tactical, whack-a-mole approach is not having the desired effect," said Micah Zenko, who studies counterterrorism policy at the Council on Foreign Relations.

There was no official confirmation of Mr. Wuhayshi's death from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Supporters expressed condolences on social media, while others fretted that the group faced grave internal dangers, despite its capture of territory in recent months, as Al Qaeda leaders were killed, one by one.

"Al Qaeda, to where?" one supporter wrote on Twitter, lamenting that the group had become a "hotbed of intelligence."

There were reasons to be cautious. The death of Mr. Belmokhtar, who planned an attack on an Algerian gas plant in 2013 in which 38 foreign workers died, has been reported several times over the years. And militants on Twitter announced that Mr. Wuhayshi had been replaced by the Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's military commander, Qassim al-Raymi. Mr. Raymi's death was widely, and inaccurately, reported in a 2010 strike.

Dirk Vandewalle, an expert on Libya at Dartmouth, said that strikes were no substitute for a more lasting strategy in Libya, where the breakdown of

authority had contributed to a migration crisis as impoverished Africans try to reach Europe.

“What we have in Libya is utter chaos,” Mr. Vandewalle said. “The American strike shows that we’re still relying on ad hoc measures rather than consistent policies along with the Europeans.”

But Representative Devin Nunes, Republican of California, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, praised the decision to strike at militants in Libya.

“You can’t defeat ISIS without taking on the Libya problem,” he said, noting that as Islamic State extremists come under pressure in Syria and Iraq, they must be deprived of a haven in Libya.

“If we don’t act in Libya, we’ll see it go down a rat hole,” Mr. Nunes said. “And if that happens, it could spread to Tunisia and, God forbid, to Egypt.”

In Yemen, grisly photographs in a local newspaper showed the aftermath of the drone strike last Tuesday that might have killed Mr. Wuhayshi. Witnesses told the newspaper that a drone had fired two missiles, killing three Al Qaeda members who had gathered in a public area near the beach.

The photographs showed a small crater on a stone plaza, overlooking the ocean. Another showed what appeared to be a bloodied torso, on a stretch of beach. The newspaper said that members of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula arrived after the strike, asked bystanders to leave the area and collected the bodies.

On Monday, Pentagon officials said they believed, though they could not be certain, that the weekend strike in Libya had killed Mr. Belmokhtar. Col. Steven H. Warren, a Pentagon spokesman, said the military was “still conducting the post-strike assessment to determine whether or not our intended target was eliminated.”

A militia leader in Ajdabiya, a coastal town in the country’s northeast where the strike took place and a public funeral was held on Monday, said it was impossible to be sure who had been killed.

The bodies of at least eight of the dead were charred beyond recognition, said the militia leader, who asked not to be identified for his own safety. Some militants survived the strike and were taken to a hospital, where fighters for a local branch of the Ansar al-Shariah Islamist group skirmished with local guards and took their wounded away about 11 a.m. on Monday, he said.

There are rumors of imminent reprisals against those suspected of helping the Americans, the militia leader said.

Meanwhile, Al Akhbar, a Mauritanian website that has previously published Mr. Belmokhtar’s messages, including his claim of responsibility after the 2013 attack on the gas plant, published an article on Monday saying that six of Mr. Belmokhtar’s men were killed in the weekend strike.

It did not list Mr. Belmokhtar among the dead.

The article, written in French, said that the strike hit a garden inside Ajdabiya around 2 a.m. local time on Saturday. It was inside this garden that Mr. Belmokhtar was presiding over a meeting of Qaeda members, it said.

An individual associated with the Shabab, Al Qaeda’s East African branch, also denied that Mr. Belmokhtar had died. “Heard from two AQ bros that he’s alive, and 6 of the mujahedeen have been killed,” he wrote in a private message.