

United States House of Representatives Testimony

Frederic Wehrey, Senior Associate, Middle East Program,
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

April 3, 2014

Joint Hearing of the House Oversight and Government
Reform Subcommittee on National Security and House
Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and Border
Security

Chairman Gowdy and Chaffetz, Ranking Member Lofgren and Tierney, distinguished committee members, I am grateful for this opportunity to speak with you about Libya's security crisis and why a repeal of CFR 214.5, which prohibits aviation and nuclear-related assistance to Libyan nationals, is necessary to give the U.S. the required flexibility to help the Libyan government in its difficult transition.

I have visited Libya four times since the fall of Qadhafi in 2011, traveling to the country's major centers of power: Zintan, Tripoli, Misrata, and the troubled eastern city of Benghazi. I have spoken with a range of government officials, Libyan military officers, Islamists, and militia leaders regarding the country's lack of security and what to do about it. In nearly all cases, I heard support for the role of the United States in liberating the country and a desire to receive increased assistance, particularly in the security field.

As an officer in the U.S. Air Force Reserve, I also had the unique opportunity in 2009 (and again in early 2011) to serve as a reserve military attaché at the Defense Attaché Office in Tripoli where I worked on U.S. security assistance to the Libyan army. The

experience gave me unique insights into both the capabilities and shortcomings of Libya's military.

Based on this service and my subsequent visits to the country, I will offer some detailed observations about the roots of Libya's ongoing troubles. These observations demonstrate why outside assistance to the country's army and police, particularly in the aviation realm, is so central to the country's post-conflict recovery.

The Roots of Libya's Security Vacuum

Libya's current instability stems in part from the weakness and disorganization of its formal security institutions—the army and the police—and in part from the power of the country's militias, which possess greater firepower and numbers. Lacking its own police force and army, the transitional government cut a deal with these militias in late 2011 and 2012 that included 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 and, 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. This has included 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 shut down oil production, while in the south they guard the porous frontier. Benghazi remains a city under siege, wracked by assassinations and bombings.

Much of the country's hope in bringing a durable and democratic peace to its citizens lies in the hands of its politicians and its vibrant civil society: fostering a broad-based national reconciliation process, developing a constitution that is fit for

purpose, ensuring a functioning parliament that provides checks and balances, and government departments that can effectively deliver services to its citizens. There are a number of sources deepening polarization in Libya that must be resolved through patient political dialogue and consensus building. These include the question of federalism, the balance between central and municipal authorities, and the role of Islam in political life. The young men who fill the militias ranks must be given incentives to leave: to pursue job training, scholarships, or entry into the regular police and army. The U.S. and others can help address these challenges by offering advice and modest assistance, but the ultimate burden must be carried by Libyans themselves.

The Importance of U.S. Security Assistance

Building up Libya's military and police are central pillars of post-conflict reconstruction and an area where outside assistance is vital, particularly from the United States.

In response to Libya's deepening crisis and a request by the Libyan government, the U.S., Italy, Britain, Morocco, and Turkey have committed to train and equip a new Libyan national army. This force, denoted in military terms as a "General Purpose Force" (GPF), will comprise an estimated 19,000 trainees, with the U.S. responsible for 5,000 to 8,000.

It is hard to overstate the enormity of this challenge. Libya is in effect building its military forces from scratch. With the exception of a few elite units commanded by his sons, Qadhafi kept the Libyan army underfunded, ill equipped, and poorly organized because he feared the prospect of a coup. When I interacted with the Libyan military in early 2011, its facilities, equipment and even uniforms were shockingly decrepit. Basic communications relied on 1970s-era technology. Its ranks were bloated at the senior levels and largely bereft of junior officers and senior non-commissioned officers—the backbone of any military.

Today, Libya's government desperately needs a capable military and police to assert better administrative control over vast expanses of its territory. It also needs a stronger military to confront extremists bent on destabilizing Libya and its neighbors. During my last trip to Benghazi in November, I was struck by the poor state of Libyan army units based in the city: ill-equipped and lacking even basic body armor and secure communications, they are indistinguishable from local Islamist militias by whom they are frequently outgunned.

Aviation is an especially important part of the government's effort to bolster security across the country. It is also crucial for border control, a task that affects not just Libya's stability but that of its Sahelian and Saharan neighbors.

But the Libyan air force is currently unable to perform even the most basic missions. Its aircraft are poorly and infrequently maintained and flight training is inadequate. The air force's ability to ferry equipment and personnel from one part of the expansive country to another is especially limited. It is an area where the Libyans have reached out to the U.S. for assistance.

Based on my conversations with Libyan officers and AFRICOM officials, equipping Libya's military with new lift and transport aircraft—such as the C-130J and CH-47—and training a new generation of Libyan pilots are key elements in the broader U.S. plan to help Libya's government secure its territory and confront extremism. It is essential that the U.S. Department of Defense, AFRICOM and component services have the necessary flexibility to meet Libya's security assistance needs. CFR 214.5 stands in the way of this assistance.

The effort to train and equip Libya's military is fraught with challenges and difficulties. U.S. support to the GPF must be undertaken in such a way that does not further polarize the country or exacerbate its instability. The U.S. must ensure that it trains a

force that is respectful of human rights and subordinate to democratically elected officials. The force's officers and rank-and-file must be drawn from across Libya's diverse regions, tribes, and ethnic groups. And its formation must be accompanied by parallel tracks of political reconciliation and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration.

The Challenge of Extremism in Libya

Mr. Chairman, let me conclude with a few words about the place of Islamic extremism in Libya and the influence of al-Qaeda. Some observers have suggested that the Libyan government is growing increasingly hostile to the United States and is coming under the sway of hardline Islamists. Much of this commentary is unfortunately based on a superficial and cursory reading of Libya's complex political spectrum.

There are certainly pockets of Libyan territory that are ripe for exploitation by local jihadists working in conjunction with transnational al-Qaeda elements. This is most evident in the southwest border regions and in Libya's eastern cities of Derna and Benghazi. But these actors remain on the outer fringes of Libya's politics and security institutions.

Overwhelmingly, the country's Islamists reject violence for political means. Like other Libyan politicians from across the ideological spectrum, they remain committed to moving the country forward on a democratic path. And they welcome greater cooperation with the U.S., provided it is done in a way that is respectful of Libyan sovereignty and rests on a foundation of mutual trust.

Mr. Chairman, the repeal of CFR 214.5 will help build that trust. It will pave the way for the U.S. to provide vital aviation assistance to Libya's military. It is a small but important step in enabling the country's democratically elected government to protect its citizens

and territory, combat violent extremism, and advance the hard-won gains of its revolution.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you here today.