

# The Origins and Evolution of ISIS in Libya



Jason Pack, Rhiannon Smith, and Karim Mezran



# The Origins and Evolution of ISIS in Libya

ISBN: 978-1-61977-416-2

Cover art: Lydia Jabs

Cartography: Michael Athanson

**This publication was made possible with generous support by Eye on ISIS ([eyeonisisinlibya.com](http://eyeonisisinlibya.com)).**



*This report is written and published in accordance with the Atlantic Council Policy on Intellectual Independence. The authors are solely responsible for its analysis and recommendations. The Atlantic Council and its donors do not determine, nor do they necessarily endorse or advocate for, any of this report's conclusions.*

June 2017

# Abstract

Given the rich history of jihadist activities in Libya over the past six years, retracing and investigating the origins and trajectory of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and other extremist actors presents actionable insights into how nodes of jihadist actors coalesce; how they interfere in post-conflict state building; the threats they pose to civilians, nascent economies, and external actors; and finally, what complexities remain when the territoriality of jihadist statelets has been eradicated, but their adherents have not been killed nor their ideology debunked. Therefore, although this report is a case study of ISIS's growth, expansion, consolidation, and then dispersal in Libya, it holds broader lessons for how Western governments and militaries should approach jihadist actors globally. Significantly, the report sheds light on Libya's constantly evolving position in global jihadist networks connecting Afghanistan, Iraq, Europe, and North Africa over the past few decades. It is out of this milieu that Salman Abedi, the British-Libyan suicide bomber involved in the May 22, 2017, Manchester Arena attack, sprung.

Libya's primary problem is the absence of governance, yet the country does not require nation-building assistance writ large, nor does it need injections of development aid; it requires targeted capacity-building programs that empower Libyan actors to take control of their own destiny and create an environment in which foreign investment can thrive. The West must be careful not to be sucked into supporting one Libyan bloc over the others. Cleverly incentivizing compromises among the main parties would be a preferable option.

# Table of Contents

Findings .....	1
Executive Summary .....	2
Acknowledgements .....	5
I. Jihadism Under Qaddafi: The Precursors of ISIS in Libya (1980s-2010) .....	7
II. Jihadists During the 2011 Uprisings.....	9
III. Libya’s Post-Qaddafi Political Vacuum and Statelessness.....	12
IV. Jihadist Groups Take Advantage of the Political Vacuum (2011-2014).....	15
V. Filling the Vacuum: ISIS’s Libyan Wilayat (2014-2015).....	19
VI. Sirte: ISIS Seizes Territory in Libya (2015-2016) .....	25
VII. Slow Western Response (2014-2015).....	30
VIII. The Battle for Sirte (2016).....	35
IX. Conclusion: What Next for ISIS in Libya? (2017 and beyond).....	40
X. Recommendations: A Purely Counter-Terror Approach to ISIS in Libya is Insufficient .....	46
Authors .....	51
Appendix A: Key Groups and People .....	52
 <b>Maps</b>	
Map 1. Control of Libya and ISIS Attacks as of May 2015 .....	22
Map 2. Control of Libya and ISIS Attacks as of May 2016 .....	27
Map 3. Control of Libya and ISIS Attacks as of May 2017 .....	41
 <b>Interactive Timelines</b>	
Timeline 1. Other Jihadi Actors (2014-2017).....	16
Timeline 2. ISIS in Action (2014-2017).....	21
Timeline 3. Western Response (2014-2017).....	31
Timeline 4. Anti-ISIS Coalition (2014-2017) .....	36

# Findings

## 1. Brutality Backfires

Our data show that, over the last three years, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has become the enemy of the vast majority of the Libyan people. By killing too many people and brutally crushing resistance, ISIS first lost Derna and in December 2016, lost Sirte. This fits into a larger regional dynamic, where ISIS brutality occasions backlashes: ISIS lost in Yemen because they were too brutal and acted against tribal norms, undermining their ability to compete with more established groups like al-Qaeda. Furthermore, in Libya, ISIS has been doubly challenged by its inability to rely on sectarian cleavages to marshal support from the Sunni population as it has done in Iraq and Syria.

## 2. Statelessness Created ISIS

There is no such thing as a purely military strategy to defeat ISIS. ISIS is a symptom of broader Libyan problems, especially weak governance. The tyranny exercised by Libyan militias has been at the heart of Libya's instability for the past six years. It constituted a major contributing factor to the environment that attracted ISIS in the first place. Therefore, international and Libyan policy needs to treat root causes. Any anti-ISIS strategy for Libya must include a plan for bolstering Libyan institutions and dealing with Libya's militia menace. Merely evicting ISIS from Sirte has not and will not solve any of these underlying problems as ISIS cells maintain a presence in Libya and their ideology persists. Libya's ongoing statelessness allows it to be used as a training ground and communications hub for ISIS to project power abroad. The unique effectiveness of Libya's governance vacuum as an incubator for jihadist operations was showcased to devastating effect with the May 22, 2017, Manchester Arena bombing. To rebuild Libya, militias must be folded into civic life—their functions professionalized through new, coherent security institutions. Now that ISIS has lost its territorial control of Sirte, Western governments should provide further support for efforts to formalize, institutionalize, and restructure Libya's security institutions.

## 3. Necessity to Decentralize Authority

ISIS was allowed to thrive in vulnerable localities in Libya because previous central governments have been reluctant to devolve power to local authorities. Western policy must seek to get the militias and local councils to take ownership of governance and justice issues, rather than merely directing them to fight ISIS or other jihadists. The governance of Sirte in the aftermath of liberation from ISIS control is a case in point.

## 4. Marginalization in Libyan Society Enabled ISIS

ISIS has been able to exploit, and seek refuge within, communities that suffered in the wake of the 2011 uprisings. Communities vulnerable to ISIS's exploitation have included both pro-Qaddafi elements and more radical elements of those militias that supported the uprisings. True national reconciliation and inclusiveness in Libya, especially between formerly pro-Qaddafi actors and rebels and between anti-Islamist and pro-Islamist actors, is required to end the pattern of radicalization in Libya. This can be achieved by building a genuine reconciliation process into any new unity government plan and into the new Libyan constitution.

# Executive Summary

## Libya's Unique Position in Global Jihadist Geography

Libya has been a major hub for global jihadist movements and foreign fighters since at least the 1980s. Following the ouster of Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011, Libya has continued to hold a uniquely important, yet constantly fluctuating, position within the global jihad. As the new Libyan state apparatus failed to consolidate its institutions and failed to ingratiate itself with the Libyan population during the initial post-Qaddafi period from 2012-13, Libya's political and security vacuum made it the ideal spot to which jihadist fighters could retreat after engagement in Iraq and Syria. Jihadist groups were also able to establish, by force, their own exclusive pockets of control, especially in Benghazi and Derna. Over the course of 2014, jihadist fighters progressively embedded themselves in many of the country's key militias and as Libya's government fractured in two, many quiescent jihadist groups chose to indirectly support the Tripoli faction by engaging in violent conflict with forces aligned with the Tobruq government and General Khalifa Haftar. At this point, Libya became a spot for jihadists to implement their "post-graduate training in jihad," which they had received fighting alongside the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). ISIS's aim was to expand the caliphate and establish jihadist emirates in "under-governed" spaces like Derna and Sirte, and later to defeat the tyrant (*taghut*) Haftar. As jihadist militias proliferated, key commanders pledged allegiance to ISIS. This led to ISIS's takeover, in October 2014, of the only city in Libya that had been firmly controlled by the jihadists since Qaddafi's fall—Derna.<sup>1</sup>

Initially, the links between those in Libya who pledged allegiance to ISIS and the ISIS command centers in Mosul and Raqqa were quite loose. However, due to the constant flow of people and ideas from Syria to Derna, Tripoli, and Benghazi, ISIS's Libya franchise came to imitate many of the key attributes of ISIS's core in the Levant, including its brutal methods of governance.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it was ISIS's penchant for excessive brutality and extractive governance that provoked a backlash against its rule in Derna in late 2014. Meanwhile, it capitalized on the civic war inside Sirte, co-opting

some jihadist elements based there as well as members of disgruntled tribes that had been affiliated with the Qaddafi regime.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on these alliances and brutally suppressing their opponents, groups pledging allegiance to ISIS established themselves as the sole governing authority in Sirte in 2015, implementing their novel vision of *imama* (Islamic statehood), *takfir* (denouncing others as apostates), and sustained territorial control.<sup>4</sup>

After ISIS's "Emir" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi formally recognized ISIS emirates in Libya, and given the initial successes of these emirates at attracting recruits and expanding territory, Libya was recast in jihadist propaganda as the primary redoubt should top ISIS commanders need to flee the Levant. In December 2016, after an eight-month-long offensive, Misratan-led militias, supported by US airstrikes, succeeded in driving ISIS out of Sirte. Although their territorial model has collapsed, ISIS fighters continue to maintain a presence in Libya and there are indications that they are regrouping south of Sirte. ISIS's loss of territorial control in Libya means it is likely to shift tactics away from state-building and toward more traditional guerilla-style tactics. The suicide bombing of a Manchester concert arena on May 22, 2017, which was claimed by ISIS and was conducted by a British Libyan with links to jihadist networks in Libya, indicates a potential shift toward using Libyan territory to conduct "shock and awe" attacks in the West, while also attracting recruits to Libya.

As the Iraqi army continues its assault against ISIS in Mosul, the continued existence of ISIS cells in Libya, despite the group's eviction from Sirte, serves as a unique case study of the challenges, consequences, and potential dangers of defeating ISIS and other jihadist groups territorially and how they might regroup and rebrand themselves after such a defeat.

## Who Participates in ISIS in Libya?

Information leaked about thousands of ISIS recruits in March 2016 showed that the majority of Libyan ISIS recruits claimed that they had previously waged jihad in their local communities during the 2011 Libyan

1 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, November 3, 2014, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-3-november-2014/>.

2 Aaron Zelin, "The Islamic State's Territorial Methodology," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote29-Zelin.pdf>.

3 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, December 7, 2014, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-7-december-2014/>.

4 Nathaniel Rosenblatt, "All Jihad Is Local: What ISIS' Files Tell US About Its Fighters," New America Foundation, July 2016, <https://na-production.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/ISIS-Files.pdf>.

revolution, before going abroad to join ISIS. For these men, fighting in Iraq and Syria served as a type of graduate-level training in terrorist activity. Just as a master's degree is a signal of advanced knowledge of a subject and qualification for higher positions, jihad in Iraq or Syria signaled to local extremist groups that a fighter had advanced skills to compete against other groups vying for power in Libya's security vacuum. If that recruit was connected via multigenerational ties to combat-tested extremist groups, as in the case of Manchester bomber Salman Abedi, all the better. Such a candidate was ideally suited for a command or implementation position.<sup>5</sup>

Beginning in 2013, these Libyan ISIS fighters slowly began returning home, mostly to Benghazi and Derna—unsurprising given the deep roots of anti-Qaddafi sentiment in those cities over the past decades. ISIS initially flourished there, culminating in the official recognition of three new ISIS “emirates”—the governance structures by which ISIS claims to exert its power and authority over certain geographical regions—in November 2014. The emirates corresponded to Libya's three historical Ottoman-era provinces of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan in the west, east, and southwest of Libya respectively,<sup>6</sup> and they represented a strategic move by ISIS to project its power within Libya despite only having influence in a few coastal cities.

A significant number of ISIS fighters in Libya are not Libyan but are mostly from Tunisia, Egypt, and Sudan; however, the reasons why ISIS was able to establish its most formidable satellite emirate in Libya were largely Libyan.<sup>7</sup> Understanding this reality will help the international community plan for effective, long-term assistance aimed at thwarting ISIS in Libya and preventing the group from returning. Libyan ISIS fighters specifically, and Libyan jihadists in general, cannot be understood in isolation from the context of the post-uprising, Libyan reality and the global circulation of jihadist fighters from which they emerged.

Since the 2011 uprisings, Libyan groups already involved in or subsequently drawn to jihadism have been motivated by a desire to “complete” the

revolution—i.e., to purge Libya of the vestiges of Qaddafi and to impede the rise of a central, democratic state apparatus.<sup>8</sup> This report on the Libyan branches of ISIS situates the organization within the post-Qaddafi political and tribal scene, while also contextualizing those same ISIS fighters in Libya within the global matrix of international jihadists.

## Scope of Report and Methodology

There have been a number of quality explorations of the political developments that led to an environment in which ISIS could thrive in Libya.<sup>9</sup> Taking a different approach, this report investigates the jihadist antecedents to ISIS in Libya, ISIS's actions in Derna and Sirte, which got the group established in those locations, and the response of Western and Libyan militias to the ISIS phenomenon. With this group-specific focus, taking into account the broader political context, this report is able to generate recommendations for countering ISIS and groups like it in the future.

The information for this report derives from existing literature on ISIS, the authors' first-hand experiences working in Western institutions tasked with combating jihadist threats in Libya, human source interviews with Libyans involved in the post-uprisings transition process, and from data derived from Eye on ISIS in Libya (EOIL). EOIL is a US-based 501(c)3 organization founded by Jason Pack. EOIL's website consists of data and analysis on the origins and evolution of ISIS in Libya, starting in mid-2014 and continuing beyond the end of 2016, when ISIS was finally dislodged from its base in Sirte. Despite the name, Eye on ISIS in Libya is focused on all jihadist groups in Libya as well as detailing the actions of other militias and international actors' responses to them. EOIL's primary data are published weekly and divided into four categories, each with weekly entries and overview timelines: *ISIS in Action*, the *Western Response*, *Other Jihadist Actors*, and the *Anti-ISIS coalition* of Libyan militias.<sup>10</sup> The information underlying these posts

5 Alia Brahimi, “Why Libya is still a global terror threat,” *Guardian*, May 25, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/25/libya-global-terror-threat-manchester-attack-gaddafi>.

6 Frederic Wehrey and Ala' Alrababah, “Rising Out of Chaos: the Islamic State in Libya,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, March 5, 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59268>.

7 “Minister: 1,000 Tunisians fighting for ISIS in Libya,” *Al-Arabiya*, September 7, 2016, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/09/07/Minister-1-000-Tunisians-fighting-for-ISIS-in-Libya.html>.

8 Omar Ashour, “Between ISIS and a Failed State: The saga of Libyan Islamists,” *The Brookings Institution*, August 2015, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Libya\\_Ashour-FINALE.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Libya_Ashour-FINALE.pdf).

9 For just two prominent examples see, Mattia Toaldo, “Intervening Better: Europe's Second Chance in Libya,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, May 13, 2016, [http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/intervening\\_better\\_europes\\_second\\_chance\\_in\\_libya](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/intervening_better_europes_second_chance_in_libya); Karim Mezran, “ISIS Expansion in Libya and the Government of National Accord,” *Atlantic Council*, January 8, 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/isis-expansion-in-libya-and-the-government-of-national-accord>.

10 To receive the Eye on ISIS in Libya weekly newsletter detailing jihadist activities and the international response direct to your inbox, please visit <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/subscribe/>.



derives from Libyan sources who need to remain anonymous for their safety. This report only plumbs the surface of what is a very deep well of EOIL data. The website contains over a thousand separate posts and represents a distillation of over twenty thousand pages of primary source reports and analysis.<sup>11</sup> EOIL

also produces think-tank reports such as *Who Pays for ISIS in Libya?* which was published in August 2016 by the Norwegian think tank, Hate Speech International and *Mapping Libya's Jihadists* published by the same think tank in June 2017.<sup>12</sup>

---

11 The Eye on ISIS in Libya dataset is uniquely searchable and represents the most complete repository of the history and activities of ISIS in Libya available in English: <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-materials/>. For the evolution of the historiography of jihadis in Libya over time, see <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/reports/>. For a monthly risk assessments on the threats emanating from jihadist actors,

---

see <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/monthly-risk-assessment/>. For a blog feed about how ISIS in Libya is covered in the English language media, see <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/media-links/>.  
12 A repository of the Eye on ISIS in Libya team's publications which derive from the data set is available here: <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/publications/>.

# Acknowledgements<sup>13</sup>

This report, and the whole Eye on ISIS 501(c)3 from which it springs, would not have been possible without the time, efforts, and selfless strivings (*jahood*) of the initial Eye on ISIS team. They joined me in the leap of faith that fully employed professionals could use their evenings and weekends to sort through tens of thousands of pages of back data in English and Arabic—utilizing them to compose succinct, categorized, and crosschecked updates—while simultaneously designing and populating a website to make said information publicly available.

Our greatest debts of gratitude must go to our anonymous Libyan expert colleagues, upon whom the quality and legitimacy of the whole project rests. You have done a great service to your country and to the world. We hope our efforts to process, analyze, categorize, and publicize your work—seeking to transform the raw data into a format digestible by policy makers and the media—repays the sacred trust you have placed in us. I might not be a Libyan by birth, but through our friendship, you have made me proud to call myself a Libyanist by calling. The fact that our forefathers came from different parts of the world will not prevent us from always being blood brothers.

Next, the Eye on ISIS train would not have left the station without Lydia Sizer and Nate Mason. They got in at the ground floor, rolled up their sleeves, and selflessly processed over a hundred weeks of my proprietary reports about local security conditions and jihadi activity in Libya—extracting the key nuggets of information and using them to populate the website. They did so without asking for pay and they deserve more credit for the final product than it is possible to give them via a simple mention in the acknowledgements. Next, we remain indebted to Aaron Zelin of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, who not only lent his significant expertise on the subject of jihadist propaganda, but drove traffic to our website by cross-posting our EOIL content on jihadology.net.

Sincere thanks must go out to original EOIL team members Brett Sidelinger and Kate O’Connell, who were involved in coordinating postings and conducting social media; and to Anna Pack and Jennifer Segal who designed the backend of the website and the graphics respectively. Jennifer, thanks for your patience, kindness, and support.

For the site’s current upkeep and the report’s captivating cover art, we are immensely grateful to Lydia Jabs, without whose varied talents and boundless energy, Eye on ISIS would be hamstrung in its future outreach to target audiences across multiple platforms. Staying with the importance of the visual for rapidly conveying complex information, Michael Athanson has lent his considerable expertise as a Cartographer with the Bodleian library at Oxford and his own consultancy Orthodrome, to create detailed clickable maps and timelines, which visualize the vast array of data unearthed by the Eye on ISIS project.

For proofreading the papers many drafts and providing expert feedback on its contents and style, we must thank Fred Wehrey, Michael Daley, Suleiman Ali Zway, and Alia Brahim. The authors are also grateful to Elissa Miller of the Atlantic Council for her valuable input and tireless managing of the myriad technical and institutional complexities surrounding publication.

Crucially, we must thank our generous funders who have allowed me to recoup some of the initial outlay of personal funds, which were used to jump start this project. Firstly, we are grateful to CRCM North Africa. CRCM is a German consulting company focused on security and crisis management in the North African region. They are EOIL’s first major funding partner. Secondly, we are humbled by the generosity of the Libyan Institute of Advanced Studies, who is serving as a syndicating sponsor of Eye on ISIS content. We share their vision that detailed publicly accessible information about the activities of jihadists in Libya is essential to formulating intelligent public policies towards the threats they pose. Both LIAS and CRCM, Eye on ISIS’s first two major sponsors, have had no editorial control over any Eye on ISIS content nor any involvement in this Atlantic Council

---

<sup>13</sup> These acknowledgements are written exclusively by Jason Pack, Founder of Eye on ISIS in Libya and first author of this paper.

paper publication. It should go without saying that they do not take responsibility or endorse the opinions expressed herein.

Lastly, we would like to thank the anonymous donors who have helped make this publication possible. They have dedicated their waking hours to fighting the roots of jihadism in Libya and striving to promote accountable and democratic governance. We hope the seeds you plant ripen into the fruit that nurtures future generations of Libyans.



# I. Jihadism Under Qaddafi: The Precursors of ISIS in Libya (1980s-2010)

## Qaddafi's Opponents Embrace Islamism

Libya has traditionally occupied a unique position on the global jihadist circuit, in part due to the Qaddafi-era repression that inspired homegrown jihadism. Since the Afghani *mujahadeen* in the 1980s, Libyans have been overrepresented per capita amongst foreign fighters in the world's jihadist hotspots, but their motivations for fighting have often differed from those of their peers. They have not generally ascribed to the same extreme interpretation of Islam as, for example, their Saudi counterparts.<sup>14</sup> Instead, their motivation to fight has tended to stem from local political grievances, with the skills and connections developed through jihad overseas being brought to bear on the political context in Libya upon their return. For example, the organization that posed the most serious opposition to Qaddafi's rule, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (*Muqatilah*) was founded in Afghanistan, not in Libya's historical eastern province of Cyrenaica—where it waged a brutal guerrilla campaign from 1996–99.<sup>15</sup>

Qaddafi's *Jamahiriyyan* form of government depoliticized the country and made public engagement impossible outside of the confines of regime structures.<sup>16</sup> As such, the mosque provided the only space for alternative political socialization, and Islamism—including extreme interpretations of Islam—became the best tool with which to engage in political activism. This led to Islamism becoming “weaponized” during the later Qaddafi period; many of the key social movements that sought regime change during the Qaddafi era were Islamist, despite Libyan society's traditionally conservative non-Salafist orientation.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the National Front for the Salvation of Libya, the main anti-Qaddafi Libyan diaspora organization that sought to present a government-in-exile style alternative to the regime, also used Islamism as

a unifying force.<sup>18</sup> This trend has outlasted the Qaddafi period, even though new avenues for political participation, including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), elections, and party politics, have come into being.

## Early Libyan Connections with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham

The history of Libya's connection to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) can be traced to the rise of the group in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. In particular, Libya's eastern cities of Derna and Benghazi had strong links to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the Iraqi Sunni al-Qaeda affiliate founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 1999, which later evolved into ISIS under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's leadership in 2013. Although the AQI leadership boasted that nearly all the group's members were Iraqi nationals, in late 2007, the so-called “Sinjar Records” revealed details about the large numbers of foreign nationals that bolstered their ranks. These records revealed a strong Libyan contingent among fighters who joined between 2006 and 2007: of the 440 records that listed a city and country of origin for the foreign fighters, Derna fielded fifty-two fighters, the most of any city in the world, while Benghazi fielded twenty-one.<sup>19</sup> Fighters from Misrata, Sirte, and Ajdabiya were also listed as coming to Iraq during this time. The relatively high numbers of fighters from Derna and Benghazi are unsurprising. Both cities had been associated with key Islamist movements aimed at regime change in eastern Libya, and faced radicalizing persecution as a result during the 1990s.<sup>20</sup> Many of the members of these movements, including the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), had also been so-called “Afghan Arabs,” volunteer Arab *mujahadeen* who travelled to Afghanistan to support extremist groups like al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>21</sup> The connections these Libyan

14 Primary author interviews; Noman Benotman, Jason Pack, and James Brandon, “Islamists,” in *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qaddafi Future*, ed. Pack, 191–228.

15 Ibid.

16 Hanspeter Mattes, “Formal and Informal Authority in Libya since 1969” in *Libya since 1969, Qaddafi's Revolution Revisited*, Dirk Vandewalle, ed. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 55–82.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, “Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records,” Combatting Terror Center at West Point, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/aqs-foreign-fighters-in-iraq.pdf>, 10.

20 Benotman, Pack, and Brandon, “Islamists,” 191–228.

21 Alison Pargeter, “Qaddafi and Political Islamic in Libya,” in *Libya since 1969, Qaddafi's Revolution Revisited*, Dirk Vandewalle, ed.

Afghan Arabs made with global extremist networks, and the experiences Libyan fighters had with AQI in the following decade, facilitated relationships and patterns of movement (from Libya to Iraq and back again) that would inform the future relationship between ISIS and Libya—as well as the many attempts by jihadists to overthrow the Qaddafi regime from the 1990s onward. It is significant that the father of Salman Abedi, the twenty-two-year-old perpetrator of the May 22, 2017, Manchester bombing, was a member of the LIFG and therefore had access to such networks.<sup>22</sup> This highlights that the origins of ISIS in Libya, and within the Libyan diaspora, date to the LIFG, and that these links continue to exert something akin to a path dependency on ISIS's current actions today. It may also present various opportunities for a solution to the ISIS problem via tackling the very concerns that gave rise to the LIFG initially—statelessness, regional grievances, and political marginalization.

Historically, as Libya's Islamist groups emerged, some such as the Hizb ut-Tahrir revolutionary group were quickly crushed by Qaddafi in the 1970s, while others were co-opted by the regime after years of fruitless

struggle. Yet the LIFG was different; its nucleus and ideological appeal persisted, even after contact with the regime, due to its operational networks abroad and in the Libyan diaspora. The leadership within the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafists (influenced by Saudi Wahhabism), and the LIFG all struck separate deals with Qaddafi in which they pledged to abandon violent opposition to the regime in order to secure their survival.<sup>23</sup> This culminated in the heralded 2010 reconciliation between the Islamists and the Qaddafi regime, negotiated via the Salafist-jihadist rehabilitation and reintegration efforts of Saif al-Islam Qaddafi, Muammar Qaddafi's most prominent son.<sup>24</sup> This co-optation of some elements of the LIFG and the Brotherhood from 2006 onward meant that the main currents of Islamism inside Libya were in organizational disarray at the start of the 2011 uprisings: large blocs of the LIFG refused to follow their leaders' calls for political integration, while others distanced themselves from extremist Islamic rhetoric and practices, but still eschewed cooperation with the regime. Thus, the divided Islamists were slow to unite as a bloc and back the opposition to Qaddafi, and as a result non-Libyan jihadist ideological currents were able to displace authentically Libyan forms of religiosity.<sup>25</sup>

---

(New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 94.

22 Jason Pack, "20th-century Libyan jihadism's role in Manchester attack," *Al Monitor*, May 28, 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/libya-jihad-manchester-attack-isis-salman-abedi.html#ixzz4iSgZfKik>.

23 Benotman, Pack, and Brandon, "Islamists," 191–228.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

## II. Jihadists During the 2011 Uprisings<sup>26</sup>

### Present at the Creation

Although the 2011 uprisings against Qaddafi were initiated by non-Islamist<sup>27</sup> civil society activists, lawyers, returned diaspora intellectuals, and disaffected young people, jihadist groups flocked helter-skelter to the uprisings within a matter of days, despite their recent reconciliation with the regime. A fatwa issued by the soon-to-be Grand Mufti Sadeq al-Ghariani, in which he articulated an Islamic legitimacy for the anti-Qaddafi uprisings, was instrumental in early recruitment. In the words of a Tripolitanian revolutionary fighter we interviewed:

This critical moment changed Libya's uprisings from a nationalist/civil society dominated affair to an ideological one. Ghariani invoked a clear divine directive to Libyan youth to practice jihad against the tyrant. Many even without an Islamist orientation felt compelled to answer this call. Before 20 February, Libyans on the streets in Tripoli and western Libya in general were very anxious and alienated from the goings-on in Benghazi, but Ghariani's call sparked demonstrations in Tripoli. What emerged was a block of youth (*thuwwar*) who came immediately under the command of jihadist networks in one way or another, whether from their deference to Ghariani's religious superiority, or out of a respect for the jihadists' battle experience. *Allahu Akbar* becoming the emblem of the revolution, the *Takbeer* (religious anthem) becoming the battle hymn. In many ways Islamism provided the soundtrack for the revolution, even though the bulk of the 'human' fuel was the general Libyan society, especially the non-ideological, non-Islamist youth.<sup>28</sup>

While seeking greater power and influence, Islamist groups worked within and in parallel to the broader opposition movement, despite ideological differences with key leaders. Early in the rebellion, there were clear pragmatic reasons for this unlikely cooperation.

Islamist leaders may have felt they needed an alliance with the broader non-Islamist opposition for credibility given their rapprochement with Qaddafi after 2006. More importantly, the Islamists recognized that if the uprisings failed, it would mean their deaths. Derna, which was among the first towns to be liberated from Qaddafi's control (on February 20, 2011), was evidence of this threat.<sup>29</sup> In a scare-mongering attempt to exaggerate the presence of anti-Western jihadist forces in the liberated areas of eastern Libya, the Qaddafi government stated repeatedly that an "Islamic Emirate of Derna" had been established.<sup>30</sup> Only later, in 2012, would Derna actually fall to jihadist actors as a result of the splintering within the unsustainable revolutionary coalition.

### Belhadj and the LIFG Fighting Force

Islamist political actors and jihadist militias were loosely divided into three main groups during the 2011 uprisings, all with different foci: the LIFG on the battlefield, the Salafists on enforcing their social and religious doctrines, and the Muslim Brotherhood on Libya's social and political processes. Although LIFG leaders shared responsibilities with other militia commanders during the uprisings, they took primary credit for key offensives, like taking Tripoli, and used the revolutionary momentum to form militias that engaged in post-conflict political developments and sought to shape religiosity in Libya. They drew upon their global networks to acquire the funds, arms, and experience they needed to carve out their own fiefdoms from Libya's chaos and to shape the revolutionary narrative.

One of the most organized Islamist groups who fought the regime was a contingent of former LIFG members led by Abdul Hakim Belhadj, a Libyan "Afghan Arab" who was apprehended by Western intelligence and handed over to the Qaddafi regime, which tortured and imprisoned him for years.<sup>31</sup> His role in the uprisings underscores how Islamist divisions prior to

26 Mary Fitzgerald, "Finding Their Place: Libya's Islamist During and After the Revolution" in Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn eds., *The Libyan Revolution and Its Aftermath*, (London: Hurst, 2015), 177-204; Alison Pargeter, *Libya: The Rise and Fall of Qaddafi*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 2012).

27 John Esposito, "It's the Policy Stupid: Political Islam and US Foreign Policy," Georgetown School of Foreign Service, <https://acmcu.georgetown.edu/the-policy-stupid>.

28 Phone interview with anonymous highly knowledgeable Libyan source who participated in the uprisings militarily and then as a top advisor to the NTC.

29 "Libyan Islamists 'seize arms, take hostages,'" *Middle East Online*, February 20, 2011, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=44478>.

30 Thanks to Alison Pargeter and Noman Benotman for their insights on this matter.

31 "Profile: Libyan rebel commander Abdel Hakim Belhadj," BBC, July 4, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14786753>.



An Anti-Qaddafi demonstration in Tripoli in August 2011. *Photo credit: mojomogwai/Flickr.*

the uprisings allowed the small, most militant fringe to shape the incorporation of jihadists into Libya's revolutionary militias. With the start of the uprisings on February 15, 2011, Belhadj escaped Tripoli to Misrata and began to contact other LIFG members, forming the Umar al-Mukhtar Brigade in March 2011.<sup>32</sup> The brigade consisted of former LIFG members and other jihadists, as well as non-Islamist Libyans who sought more sophisticated military training. The LIFG's willingness to accept and train non-Islamist fighters improved the LIFG's reputation and facilitated the radicalization of new cadres. By invoking the name of Umar al-Mukhtar, a nationalist figure sometimes viewed with suspicion by jihadists due to being a member of the Sanussi Sufi Order, Belhadj could attract non-Islamist recruits—including those from the Western diaspora—and integrate more easily into the broader militant opposition.

<sup>32</sup> Although Belhadj escaped, Abdel Minam al-Madhouni was killed on April 16, 2011 in Ajdabiya.

### **NTC Works With Jihadist Groups**

Although the “secular” leadership within the opposition's National Transitional Council (NTC)—the semi-sovereign umbrella body that tasked itself with leading the anti-Qaddafi uprisings and representing them abroad—did not share the same goals or ideologies as the Islamist and jihadist revolutionaries, it quickly decided that it needed to enlist the jihadists' military skills in their efforts to defeat the regime.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> This phenomenon can be understood as part of the current of appeasement that undergirded NTC relations with militias, especially the Islamist and jihadist ones, from the very outset; Youssef Sawani and Jason Pack, “Libyan Constitutionality and Sovereignty Post-Qaddafi: The Islamist, Regionalist, and Amazigh Challenges,” *Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2013), 523–43; Jason Pack and Haley Cook, “The July 2012 Libyan Elections and the Origin of Post-Qaddafi Appeasement,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 69, No. 2, (Spring 2015), 171–198; Jason Pack, Karim Mezran, and Mohamed Eljarh, “Libya's Faustian Bargains: Ending the Appeasement Cycle,” Atlantic Council, May 5, 2014, [www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Libyas\\_Faustian\\_Bargains.pdf](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Libyas_Faustian_Bargains.pdf).

“Jihadists were able to deliberately undermine and infiltrate the formal state-building procedures to ensure a safe haven for their activities. . .”

The NTC’s positive assessment of the LIFG’s military capacity, which was based largely on exaggerated claims about their role in Tripoli’s liberation, led to NTC President Mustafa Abdul Jalil appointing Belhadj as the head of the Tripoli Military Council, a body created shortly before the revolutionaries took control of Tripoli on August 20, 2011. Yet, LIFG control over other jihadist-leaning militia members was tenuous. Belhadj complained, as early as 2010, about the lack of respect young militants had for the LIFG.<sup>34</sup> These young fighters were vulnerable to further radicalization by core al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb members through videos featuring Libyan leaders like Abu Yahya al-Libi.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the LIFG’s military impact

on the uprisings never matched that of Zintan or Misrata, both militias united by locality not ideology, and which came to dominate key locations in Tripoli following their leading role in the liberation of the capital.

The strength of the LIFG during and immediately after the uprisings derived from the broader appeal of their ideologies among different opposition groups, their relatively advanced expertise in combat and clandestine political activity, and their highly effective courtship of Qatar. Non-Islamist political movements lacked these advantages, creating a vacuum in which groups like the LIFG could exercise disproportionate control over Libyan politics and security. Therefore, even though they were not at the forefront of the uprisings, the jihadist and militant Islamist fringes used the revolutionary struggle, its anti-dictatorial and Islamic revivalist rhetoric, and then the post-Qaddafi chaos to prevent the rise of any coherent central authority in Libya capable of denying them independence of action. Jihadists were able to deliberately undermine and infiltrate the formal state-building procedures to ensure a safe haven for their activities, including amassing arms and funds, recruiting and moving fighters, and installing jihadists in senior positions in new security institutions.

34 Aaron Zelin and Andrew Lebovitch, “Assessing Al-Qaeda’s Presence in the New Libya,” *Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point*, March 22, 2012, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/assessing-al-qaidas-presence-in-the-new-libya>.

35 Ibid.



## III. Libya's Post-Qaddafi Political Vacuum and Statelessness

### Failure to Disband and Reintegrate Militia Structures

After the uprisings, the NTC attempted to bring various militia actors under government control, including militias associated with jihadist groups, but opted for a quicker deputization of militias through the Supreme Security Committee (SSC) and the Libya Shield Forces (LSF) rather than a more drawn out demobilization, demilitarization, and reintegration (DDR) process. As a result, militias were brought into the NTC's command and control structures and were able to continue to operate independently from the post-uprisings state, while still drawing salaries.<sup>36</sup> On one key occasion, while the uprisings were still underway, jihadist elements allegedly turned on the NTC leadership. On July 28, 2011, the NTC's commander-in-chief, General Abdel Fattah Younis, was killed. Although different theories still exist as to who the perpetrators are, many non-Islamists, especially members of Younis' powerful Obeidat tribe, have clung to a theory that militant Islamists affiliated with the Abu Ubaida ibn al-Jarrah Brigade are to blame.<sup>37</sup> This event, and the ensuing perception of hardline Islamist culpability, permanently divided the anti-Qaddafi coalition, even while their shared military campaign to unseat Qaddafi was still underway.

This environment aided the creation of disparate local jihadist organizations that would later band together into Mujahadeen Shura Councils, with tragic and destabilizing results.<sup>38</sup> From 2012 onward, Ansar al-

Sharia and other jihadist militias in Benghazi and Derna waged a campaign of assassinations, kidnappings, and attacks against members of the former regime and their families, often with the tacit support of state-sanctioned Islamist militias who shared the jihadists' hatred of Qaddafi-era security structures and personnel.<sup>39</sup> After the murder of US Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens by Ansar al-Sharia elements in Benghazi in 2012, there was a widespread exodus of Western capacity-building assistance at the same time as arms and militants flowed back to Libya due to pressure from French operations in Northern Mali via the Salvador Triangle, which only served to accelerate the destabilization of Benghazi.<sup>40</sup> The "Libya Shield 1 unit," which comprised several Islamist militias and was responsible for killing thirty-two anti-jihadist protesters in Benghazi in June 2013, was led by Wissam Bin Hamid, who went on to lead the jihadist Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC).<sup>41</sup>

### Militias Use Coercion and Force to Influence Policy

This permissive, chaotic environment emboldened some political Islamist groups to embrace revolutionary zeal over democratic legitimacy (Islamists fared poorly in both the 2012 and 2014 general elections) in their attempts to completely purge the state apparatus of any and all former regime elements. Pro-Islamist militias were able to interfere in the nascent democratic political process laid out by the August 3, 2011, Temporary Constitutional Declaration, including by pressing through the destructive Political Isolation Law (PIL) of May 2013 by besieging government

36 Pack, Mezran, and Eljarh, "Libya's Faustian Bargains: Ending the Appeasement Cycle."

37 The tribunal looking into the assassination hasn't been able to determine the exact perpetrators of the violence. For more, see "Abdel Fattah Younes case: Libya tribunal quits in Jalil row," *BBC*, December 20, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-20792361>; To make the matter even more complex and controversial, documents that surfaced during FBI investigations of Hillary Clinton's emails suggest that either the NTC or Haftar may have been involved in the Younis assassination. Nonetheless, despite this uncertainty surrounding who was responsible, there is no doubt that the killing of Abdel-Fateh Younis was a key turning point for the relationships between jihadist fighters and the nascent Libyan governmental institutions.

38 Jason Pack, "Mapping Libya's Jihadists," *Hate Speech International*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.hate-speech.org/mapping-libyas-jihadists/>.

39 Mohamed Eljarh, "Benghazi's Epidemic of Assassinations," *Foreign Policy*, October 30, 2013 <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/30/benghazis-epidemic-of-assassinations/>.

40 For more on the interconnections between arms proliferation and flow of jihadis from Libya to Mali and back, please consult Yvan Guichaoua, "Tuareg Militancy and the Sahelian Shockwaves of the Libyan Revolution" in Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn eds., *The Libyan Revolution and Its Aftermath*, (London: Hurst, 2015), 321-336.

41 "Libya: No Impunity for 'Black Saturday' Benghazi Deaths," *Human Rights Watch*, June 13, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/13/libya-no-impunity-black-saturday-benghazi-deaths>.

buildings.<sup>42</sup> Pro-lustration<sup>43</sup> sentiment ran deepest among Islamists and *thuwwar* from Benghazi, Misrata, and Zawiyah, and the law marked a key turning point in Libya's domination by militias, deepening the political and security vacuum in which ISIS was able to thrive.<sup>44</sup> The PIL excluded anyone who had held a key official post between 1969 and 2011 from holding political office for a period of ten years.<sup>45</sup> Yet, the law was not applied consistently and was used as a tool by politicians and militia commanders against their enemies when convenient; however, it struck a devastating blow to Libya's fledgling institutions by removing from public service anyone with any knowledge of how the country had functioned.

This behavior contributed to a brewing war between an anti-Islamist/anti-lustration wing and a pro-Islamist/pro-lustration wing, and eventually led to the formal fracturing of the post-Qaddafi governance system between these two factions after the Islamists' poor showing in the 2014 general elections.<sup>46</sup> The former movement was led by General Khalifa Haftar, who launched Operation Dignity in May 2014 to combat a broadly defined group of "terrorists" in Benghazi. On the other side, various stripes of political Islamists and militant jihadists united under Operation Libya Dawn, marketing themselves as the sole inheritors of revolutionary legitimacy and the only political force untainted by association with the Qaddafi regime.

## Political Vacuum Deepens as Libya Fractures

These developments fundamentally fractured post-Qaddafi efforts at state building and marked not only the start of escalated conflict and civil war between various Dawn- and Dignity-aligned militias across Libya, but also the division of Libya's political, economic, and military institutions into two or more competing

entities. In his rhetoric, General Haftar lumped together largely nonviolent political Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, with violent jihadist groups such as Ansar al-Sharia and the Mujahadeen Shura Councils, even as some of these groups periodically worked with him in his offensives in Benghazi and Derna. In turn, Haftar's aggression became a rallying point for groups recruiting in Benghazi at the time—including pro-ISIS cells. In Benghazi, on June 20, 2015, several Islamist and jihadist militias, including Ansar al-Sharia, joined together to form the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC) to counter Operation Dignity, while assassinations of anti-Islamist figures became a nearly daily occurrence.<sup>47</sup>

This fracturing of Libya's social and political fabric led to the chaos and confusion that allowed jihadist groups to extend and deepen their influence within Libya.<sup>48</sup> ISIS was able to acquire and govern territory, facilitated in part by the Islamist wing's slow disavowal of ISIS in Libya, with the grand mufti often arguing that Haftar was a more significant threat than ISIS.<sup>49</sup> As any semblance of central authority or governance fell apart, Libya was reduced to a series of statelets controlled by Dawn, Dignity, Federalists, local councils, or jihadist actors. In this vacuum, Libyan jihadists were not initially concerned with achieving territorial control in Libya. However, as the ISIS concept of "remain and expand" became more widely accepted among foreign and domestic jihadist groups present in the country, they began seizing territory when the opportunity presented itself.

## Finding a Unity Government

Throughout late 2014 and all of 2015, the international community and Libyan leaders recognized that the ongoing political crisis and insecurity was preventing a concerted response to ISIS's spread. The West needed a legitimate, internationally recognized interlocutor with whom to coordinate such a response. From December 2014 onward, United Nations (UN)-facilitated negotiations sought to encourage Libyan leaders from different interest groups to agree on a national unity government in Tripoli that would

42 Youssef Sawani and Jason Pack, "Libyan Constitutionality and Sovereignty Post-Qaddafi: The Islamist, Regionalist, and Amazigh Challenges," *Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2013), 523-43, [www.scribd.com/doc/62823350/Libya-Draft-Constitutional-Charter-for-the-Transitional-Stage](http://www.scribd.com/doc/62823350/Libya-Draft-Constitutional-Charter-for-the-Transitional-Stage).

43 Lustration literally means the process of making something clean or pure, and in a political context refers to the process of purging officials from a previous regime.

44 Jason Pack, "Libya: Situation report" Tony Blair Faith Foundation, November 10, 2014, <http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/country-profiles/libya/situation-report>.

45 Roman David and Huda Mzioudet, "Personnel Change or Personal Change? Rethinking Libya's Political Isolation Law," Brookings Doha Center - Stanford University, March 17, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Lustration-in-Libya-English.pdf>.

46 Jason Pack, "Libya Situation Report," Tony Blair Faith Foundation, June 12, 2015, <http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/country-profiles/libya/situation-report>.

47 Hanan Salah, "Counting the Dead in Benghazi," Human Rights Watch, June 6, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/06/counting-dead-benghazi>.

48 Aref Nayed, "Libya: From Revolutionary Legitimacy to Constitutional Legitimacy," *Radical Engagement: Essays on Religion, Extremism, Politics, and Libya*, (Abu Dhabi: Kalam Research and Media, 2017), 13 - 31.

49 "League of Ulema hails defeat of IS, accuses Ghariani of promoting civil war in Libya and responsibility of Tripoli laying of 12 Qaddafi soldiers," *Libya Herald*, June 15, 2016, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2016/06/15/league-of-ulema-hails-victory-of-is-accuses-ghariani-of-promoting-civil-war-in-libya-and-responsibility-for-tripoli-slayings-of-12-qaddafi-soldiers/>.

exert authority over the militias and provide effective governance for the country. Negotiations struggled from the beginning as the international community tried to identify empowered Libyan political leaders willing to attend. The UN also failed to convene militia leaders, who arguably had more influence over the political crisis and Libya's stability than the politicians. As they had since the end of the uprisings, foreign governments overestimated the power and capacity of political leaders and nascent institutions in Libya.

A diverse group of Libyan political leaders eventually agreed to a proposal for a Government of National Accord (GNA) under the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) agreed at Skhirat, Morocco in December 2015.<sup>50</sup> Under the LPA, the Tobruq-based House of Representatives (HoR)—which was elected in 2014,

and then evicted from Tripoli—was recognized as the legitimate parliament. The General National Congress (GNC)—the parliament elected in 2012—partially disbanded itself and much of its membership was subsumed into the High Council of State (HSC), a consultative body created by the LPA, under the leadership of Abdurrahman Swehli.<sup>51</sup> However, other GNC members reasserted themselves on October 15, 2016, by attempting to reinstate the GNC's defunct National Salvation government under Khalifa al-Ghwell.<sup>52</sup> On the other side, largely eastern militias loyal to Haftar viewed the GNA as a mere rebranding of their largely western, Islamist militia rivals and pursued Egyptian, Emirati, and Russian backing more forcefully than before while remaining set against the process.<sup>53</sup>

50 One school of legal thought holds that the Skhirat Agreement did not immediately upon being signed create a legitimate and sovereign Government of National Accord. According to this view, the GNA has never actually come into being as the House of Representatives never approved a ministerial list from the Presidential Council as was laid out in the Skhirat Agreement. Moreover, the Presidential Council itself has fractured with only one full cabinet meeting occurring since June 2016; International Crisis Group, "The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset," Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report, No. 170, November 4, 2016, 8-13.

51 Mary Fitzgerald and Mattia Toaldo, "A Quick Guide to Libya's Main Players," ECFR, May 2016, [http://www.ecfr.eu/mena/mapping\\_libya\\_conflict](http://www.ecfr.eu/mena/mapping_libya_conflict).

52 Rhiannon Smith and Jason Pack, "Coup Attempt Could Complicate Libya's Fight Against ISIS," Tony Blair Faith Foundation, October 24, 2016, <http://www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/coup-attempt-could-complicate-libyas-fight-against-isis>.

53 Lamine Ghanmi, "Libya's Haftar Seeks Russian Support," *Arab Weekly*, July 3, 2016, <http://www.theArabweekly.com/?id=5641>.

## IV. Jihadist Groups Take Advantage of the Political Vacuum (2011-2014)

### Since 2011: Libyan Involvement in the Foreign Fighter Crisis

After the 2011 uprisings that overthrew Qaddafi, Libyans often expressed sympathy and support for Syrians who were still battling to depose their own repressive and violent dictator. As early as 2011, Libyan fighters were traveling to join existing jihadist factions, or even creating their own groups there.<sup>54</sup> Benghazi and Derna again proved to be hotbeds for recruitment, with high levels of youth unemployment and historic community pressure to join the global jihad driving many young men to fight on new fronts.<sup>55</sup> Some of these fighters joined the ISIS precursor groups, and some did not. In 2012, fighters from Derna created the al-Battar Brigade, which eventually pledged allegiance to ISIS and continues to fight in both Iraq and Syria to this day.<sup>56</sup> Mehdi al-Herati, a prominent militia commander in Tripoli during and after the Libyan revolution, who spent most of his life in Ireland, also traveled to Syria in early 2012 to found the Umma Brigade. Al-Herati left Syria in late 2012 and eventually became mayor of Tripoli. His brigade in Syria has since been absorbed into the Free Syrian Army, not ISIS.<sup>57</sup>

There were also individuals and groups in Libya that facilitated training and travel for Tunisian foreign fighters through Libya to Syria (via Turkey), taking advantage of Libya's security vacuum to operate with relative freedom.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, there has been coordination between Libyan and Tunisian fighters (as well as those

from Algeria) to facilitate the movement of fighters to active fronts for jihad for decades. After the US invasion of Iraq, Tunisians often used such Libyan support networks to facilitate travel to Iraq, laying the groundwork for the strong coordination between internationally designated terrorist group Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and its branches in Libya after the 2011 uprisings, and later on the deep connections between ISIS fighters from Tunisia and Libya.<sup>59</sup>

By December 2013, Tunisia and Libya were among the top five countries sending the most foreign fighters to Syria.<sup>60</sup> Just as the "Sinjar Records," released nearly a decade earlier, revealed Libya's connections to AQI, data leaked by a defected ISIS fighter in 2016 shed light on the depth of Libya's connections to ISIS in the Levant, and highlighted why it was possible for the group to establish its strongest satellite presence there by 2014. The data comprised records of around 3,600 foreign fighters who had registered with ISIS at various Syria-Turkey border crossings between mid-2013 and mid-2014.<sup>61</sup> According to the data, during this period Derna and environs had the single highest per capita rate of foreign fighters joining ISIS of any other global province recorded, while there were also forty-six recorded fighters coming from Benghazi, a larger city.<sup>62</sup> It is clear from this data that by mid-2014, the relationships between Libyan jihadist networks and global networks had become strong enough to transcend the first generation of fighters who initiated them. It was not the aged and experienced "Afghan

54 Frederic Wehrey and Ala' Al-Rababa'h, "Rising Out of Chaos: The Islamic State in Libya," Carnegie Middle East Center, March 5, 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59268>.

55 "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq," The Soufan Group, December 2015, [http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf).

56 Ibid; Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, (London: Hurst, 2015).

57 Mary Fitzgerald, "Rebel Army Moves Command Center Inside Syria to Organise Fractured Forces," *Irish Times*, September 24, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120926112050/http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2012/0924/1224324323499.html>.

58 Alessandria Masi and Hanna Sender, "How Foreign Fighters Joining ISIS Travel to The Islamic State Group's Caliphate," *International Business Times*, March 3, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/how-foreign-fighters-joining-isis-travel-islamic-state-groups-caliphate-1833812>.

59 Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Tunisian-Libyan Jihadist Connection," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 6, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-tunisian-libyan-jihadist-connection>.

60 Aaron Y. Zelin, "ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise among Western Europeans," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, King's College London, December 17, 2013, <http://icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/>.

61 This data demonstrates a similar pattern of Libyans' deep connections to jihadism in the Levant as is seen in the Sinjar Records. That it persisted with a younger generation of post-Arab Spring jihadis explains the human matrix between ISIS fighters in the Levant and jihadis in Libya that facilitated the creation of a strong emirate there.

62 Nathaniel Rosenblatt, "All Jihad Is Local: What ISIS' Files Tell US About Its Fighters," New America Foundation, July 2016, <https://na-production.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/ISIS-Files.pdf>.

**Timeline 1. Other Jihadi Actors**

<b>2014</b>		<b>2016</b>	
<b>June</b>	<b>June 9:</b> Ansar al-Sharia attempts to assassinate Haftar in Benghazi	<b>June</b>	<b>June 6:</b> Hard-line Eastern Islamists establish Mufti-backed Benghazi Defense Brigades (BDB)
<b>July</b>	<b>July 14:</b> Misratan and Zintani forces clashes over Tripoli Airport	<b>July</b>	<b>Jul 18:</b> BDB claim to shoot down French advisors in LNA helicopter
<b>September</b>	<b>Sept 1:</b> Dawn announce creation of Tripoli Revolutionaries Shura Council	<b>August</b>	<b>Aug 1:</b> Anti-GNA Islamist demonstrations in Tripoli
<b>October</b>	<b>Oct 5:</b> Suicide bombs in Benghazi	<b>August</b>	<b>Aug 29:</b> Jihadi media release video of children allegedly killed by French airstrikes
<b>December</b>	<b>Dec 14:</b> Operation Shuruq: Islamists advance on Oil Crescent	<b>September</b>	<b>Sept 13:</b> Militia tensions over GNA grow in Tripoli
<b>2015</b>		<b>October</b>	<b>Oct 11:</b> Notable Islamic scholar kidnapped by anti-Mufti militias
<b>January</b>	<b>Jan 5:</b> Heavy fighting in Benghazi and Derna, employing tanks and grad rockets	<b>November</b>	<b>Nov 18:</b> LNA retake Guwarsha gate from BRSC in Benghazi
<b>March</b>	<b>Mar 29:</b> Ansar al-Sharia leader Abu Abdullah al-Libi swears allegiance to ISIS	<b>December</b>	<b>Dec 1:</b> Clashes in Tripoli between GNA militias and militias loyal to Sadeq al-Ghariani
<b>June</b>	<b>June 1:</b> PM Thinni survives assassination attempt in Tobruq	<b>December</b>	<b>Dec 26:</b> LNA bombs BDB fighters in Hun, provokes Misrata
<b>August</b>	<b>Aug 10:</b> LNA and BRSC continue to clash in Benghazi; DMSC fight ISIS in farmland around Derna	<b>2017</b>	
<b>October</b>	<b>Oct 26:</b> Benghazi demonstrators killed by mortars	<b>January</b>	<b>Jan 10:</b> Group of jihadist fighters flee from Sabri and Ganfuda in Benghazi; the LNA captures many of them
<b>December</b>	<b>Dec 15:</b> Jihadis establish roadblocks in Sabratha	<b>March</b>	<b>Mar 6:</b> BDB launches surprise attack and seizes Oil Crescent ports from LNA
<b>2016</b>		<b>March</b>	<b>Mar 14:</b> LNA launches counter-offensive against BDB and retakes Oil Crescent
<b>January</b>	<b>Jan 5:</b> ARSC in Ajdabiya deny defection to ISIS; ISIS criticize BRSC	<b>March</b>	<b>Mar 21:</b> LNA declares Ganfuda fully liberated from jihadists
<b>February</b>	<b>Feb 9:</b> Mystery air raids on Derna kill DMSC affiliates	<b>April</b>	<b>Apr 4:</b> DMSC states it only recognizes the authority of Libya's Dar al-Ifta
<b>March</b>	<b>Mar 8:</b> Links between Ansar al-Sharia and BRSC clarified; decline of non-ISIS jihadis	<b>May</b>	<b>May 8:</b> LNA launches full ground and air assault against jihadists in Sabri and Souq al-Hout
<b>May</b>	<b>May 9:</b> ISIS withdrawn from Derna after defeat by DMSC	<b>May</b>	<b>May 27:</b> Ansar al-Sharia announces official disbandment

Arab,” typically traveling from Libya to fight for ISIS in Syria, but rather Libyans in their early twenties, born between 1990 and 1994.<sup>63</sup>

### **Since 2013: Jihadist Fighters Return to North Africa**

By the end of 2013, there was also a new pattern of Libyan foreign fighters returning home from Syria, armed with the militant legitimacy that came with having fought in the widely popular Syrian civil war. If fighting for an extremist militia during the Libyan revolution was the equivalent of a “college degree in jihad,” then fighting in Syria gave fighters an additional stature, similar to that conferred by a specialized post-graduate degree. The experience of returning from Syria to Libya allowed the “graduate” to branch out on his own, and attempt to recruit others to work with him in Libya’s political vacuum. Libyan fighters were joined by many Tunisians who chose to remain in Libya rather than transit through it, as Tunisia began cracking down on extremist groups like Ansar al-Sharia in mid-2013 through their relatively more robust security institutions.<sup>64</sup>

“... due to the persistent chaos and lack of a single undisputed government in the country, ISIS in Libya became one of the most effective governing structures in the whole country.”

Buoyed by this trend, over the next three years Libya would change its position on the global jihadist circuit from a transport hub to a bona fide destination. A wave of recruitment videos began to emerge, some aimed directly at Tunisian foreign fighters, calling on them to participate in jihad in Libya as a precursor to jihad at home.<sup>65</sup> In February 2015, for example, ISIS released a video calling on foreign fighters from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia to emigrate to Libya following Abu

Bakr al-Baghdadi’s formal recognition of an emirate in Derna in November 2014.<sup>66</sup>

Libya’s terrain was particularly attractive to foreign fighters because it provided easy access to weapons, little pressure from weak security institutions, a somewhat permissive population, weak border security, no rule of law, and relative safety compared to Iraq and Syria. After it was established on September 10, 2014, the global coalition to “degrade and ultimately defeat” ISIS put immense pressure on the group in Iraq and Syria, both through airstrikes and by targeting the group’s finances. In contrast, only in mid-2016 did the air campaign against ISIS extend to Libya.<sup>67</sup> In the meantime, due to the persistent chaos and lack of a single undisputed government in the country, ISIS in Libya became one of the most effective governing structures in the whole country, and was able to co-opt many local jihadists to its cause.

### **Derna: ISIS’s First Statelet Inside Libya**

Derna’s historic connections to global jihadist movements, as well as the city’s more recent links to jihadists in Iraq and Syria, meant that Derna appeared to be the logical choice to serve as ISIS’s first headquarters in Libya. The city’s isolation from the rest of the country meant that it was also the most feasible option logistically. Derna had never been integrated into post-Qaddafi governance structures in the same way other cities had. Elections for the Constitution Drafting Assembly in February 2014 and parliamentary elections in June 2014 were unable to take place due to insecurity at polling stations, further isolating Derna residents from Libya’s emerging democratic processes. Despite a fleeting revival of civil society organizations in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, the city was quickly overrun by extremist groups who occupied the role that local councils played elsewhere in Libya during this period.

In this state of physical and political isolation, extremist groups, including an Ansar al-Sharia branch led by former Guantanamo Bay prisoner Sufian bin Qumu, took control of various neighborhoods and battled among themselves for control of the city. In June 2014, the Islamic Youth Shura Council (IYSC), an extremist organization that announced its presence in Derna in April 2014, formally declared its support for

63 Ibid.

64 Haim Malka and Margo Balboni, “Libya: Tunisia’s Jihadist Nightmare,” CSIS, June 2016, <http://foreignfighters.csis.org/tunisia/libya.html>.

65 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, January 19, 2016, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-jan-19-2016/>.

66 Jack Moore, “5,000 Foreign Fighters Flock to Libya as ISIS Call for Jihadists,” *Newsweek*, March 3, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/5000-foreign-fighters-flock-libya-isis-call-jihadists-310948>.

67 Emily Estelle and Sarah Lossing, “U.S. Counter-ISIS Air Campaign Expands to Sirte,” *Critical Threats*, August 4, 2016, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/u-s-counter-isis-air-campaign-expands-to-sirte>.

ISIS. The group was then able to consolidate control over a number of strategic areas and impose ISIS's strict interpretation of Sharia law in these areas.<sup>68</sup> Throughout September 2014, clashes raged in Derna between the al-Qaeda aligned Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade, Ansar al-Sharia's branch in Derna, and the IYSC, each fighting for control of the city.<sup>69</sup> In October 2014, the IYSC and some members of Ansar al-Sharia met iteratively in Derna, ultimately deciding to pledge their allegiance to al-Baghdadi and ISIS, forming the Cyrenaica Emirate or *wilaya*.<sup>70</sup>

Al-Baghdadi recognized the Derna emirate in November 2014, and close communications have been detected between core ISIS figures in Iraq and Syria and affiliates in Libya since.<sup>71</sup> According to Aaron Zelin, within weeks of the declaration of allegiance, the social media profile of the former IYSC conformed to ISIS models, suggesting ISIS may have provided social media guidance to ensure the new *wilayat's* online presence was harmonized with those of the core in the Levant, even if direct military or administrative orders were not enforceable from Raqqa.<sup>72</sup>

68 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Islamic State's First Colony in Libya," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 10, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-first-colony-in-libya>.

69 Rhiannon Smith, "A House Divided: Jihadis Battle for Derna," Tony Blair Faith Foundation, July 10, 2015, <http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/house-divided-jihadis-battle-derna>.

70 Maggie Michael, "How a Libyan city joined the Islamic State

group," Associated Press, November 9, 2014, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/195a7ffb0090444785eb814a5bda28c7/how-libyan-city-joined-islamic-state-group>.

71 "ISIS Loses Libyan Stronghold," Institute for the Study of War, June 24, 2015, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/isis-loses-libyan-stronghold>.

72 First author phone conversations with Aaron Zelin, December 2014.

## V. Filling the Vacuum: ISIS's Libyan Wilayat (2014-2015)

### Libyan Wilayat and Their Connections to the Levant

The structure of the *wilayat*, as recognized by al-Baghdadi in November 2014, reflected the three traditional Ottoman era provinces of Libya—Cyrenaica (or Barqa) in the east; Tripolitania in the west; and Fezzan in the southwest. After the early 2015 attacks, the Cyrenaica *wilaya* began releasing nearly weekly recruitment videos, calling on fighters to resist advances by General Haftar's anti-Islamist Operation Dignity campaign in Benghazi.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, the Tripolitanian *wilaya* focused on seizing more ground in Sirte, taking advantage of the surging numbers of foreign fighters entering Libya, as well as local support from former Ansar al-Sharia members and some former Qaddafi supporters in the area.<sup>74</sup> Finally, the Fezzan *wilaya* focused on small-scale attacks on local forces in the south, although this *wilaya* would remain relatively weak compared to the franchises in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. Dealing with Libya as three separate fronts based on local identity could hint at both the way jihadist groups could approach expansion there in the future and how the international community could effectively combat this threat by fostering coherent local governance. Since ISIS's territorial defeat in Sirte in December 2016, and given the increasing military pressure Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) forces have been exerting against jihadist groups in eastern Libya in early 2017, there has been growing speculation that ISIS cells are regrouping in Fezzan, in southwest Libya.

The connections between ISIS headquarters in Iraq and Syria and ISIS in Libya grew stronger as the group tried to make its satellite in Libya sustainable.<sup>75</sup> What started out as an ISIS franchise in Derna, with only media guidelines and no command and

control links, gradually morphed into a full-blown ISIS affiliate.<sup>76</sup> Turki al-Binali, the young Bahraini cleric who was internationally sanctioned due to his role as a recruiter for ISIS, was reportedly traveling to Sirte as early as June 2013 to engage in recruiting efforts.<sup>77</sup> Abu Ali al-Anbari (also known as Abu Ala al-Afri), al-Baghdadi's second-in-command and governor of ISIS territories in Syria, also visited Sirte in November 2015 to increase coordination between different *wilayat* in Iraq, Libya, and Syria.<sup>78</sup> ISIS also tried to establish ties with marginalized Libyan communities, including the Qadhahfa, Farjan, and Warfalla tribes as well as the Tuareg, a non-Arab minority that has been struggling for rights in southern Libya for decades and faced severe retribution for being associated with the regime during the 2011 uprisings.<sup>79</sup>

Even in ISIS's day-to-day operations in Libya, experienced fighters from Iraq and Syria occupied positions of power in the *wilayat* hierarchies. One such notable figure is Abu Nabil al-Anbari, also known by his real name, Wissam Najim Abd Zayd al-Zubaydi, an Iraqi national and veteran AQI fighter who served as emir of ISIS in Libya until he was killed during a US airstrike in Derna in November 2015.<sup>80</sup> Subsequently, although the bulk of ISIS fighters in Libya were primarily Libyan, foreign fighters with ties to al-Baghdadi continued to be tasked with maintaining the strong connections between Libya, Iraq, and Syria. In Sirte, Abu Amr

73 "Epic Battles of the Caliphate in Benghazi: Message to the Soldiers of the Tyrant - Wilayat al-Barqah," Jihadology, February 28, 2015, <http://jihadology.net/2015/02/28/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-epic-battles-of-the-caliphate-in-binghazi-message-to-the-soldiers-of-the-tyrant/>.

74 Bardia Rahmani and Andrea Tanco, "ISIS' Growing Caliphate: Profiles of Affiliates," The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, February 16, 2016, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isiss-growing-caliphate-profiles-affiliates>.

75 Aref Nayed, "ISIS in Libya: Winning the Propaganda War", *Radical Engagement: Essays on Religion, Extremism, Politics, and Libya*, (Abu Dhabi: Kalam Research and Media, 2017), 32-41.

76 Aaron Zelin, "The Islamic State's First Colony in Libya," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 10, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-first-colony-in-libya>.

77 "QDi.391 Turki Mubarak Abdullah Ahmed Al-Binali," Narrative Summaries of Reasons for Listing, UN Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning ISIL (Da'esh) Al-Qaida and Associated Individual Groups Undertakings and Entities, April 20, 2016, [https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aaq\\_sanctions\\_list/summaries/individual/turki-mubarak-abdullah-ahmad-al-binali](https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aaq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/turki-mubarak-abdullah-ahmad-al-binali); Kevin Casey and Stacey Pollard, "The Islamic State's Strategy in Libya," Sada Middle East Analysis, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 25, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=59488>.

78 David Kirkpatrick, Ben Hubbard, and Eric Schmitt, "ISIS' Grip on Libyan City Gives It A Fallback Option," *New York Times*, November 28, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/world/middleeast/isis-grip-on-libyan-city-gives-it-a-fallback-option.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/world/middleeast/isis-grip-on-libyan-city-gives-it-a-fallback-option.html?_r=0).

79 Ibid.

80 Eric Schmitt, "ISIS Leader in Libya Is Targeted in U.S. Airstrike," *New York Times*, November 14, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/15/world/middleeast/libya-isis-leader-abu-nabil.html>.





Members of Libyan pro-government forces stand near their tent during their deployment in the Lamluda area, southwest of the city of Derna, in June 2015. *Photo credit: Reuters/Stringer.*

al-Jazrawi, a Saudi national with close ties to al-Baghdadi, held many roles of responsibility within the city, and another Saudi national, Abdelkader al-Najdi, served as emir in charge of administering the Libyan *wilayat*.<sup>81</sup> The ability of non-Libyan jihadist leaders to access potential recruits in Libya means international efforts to combat violent extremist groups, particularly ISIS, will only be successful if they simultaneously target the root causes of radicalization in local populations under jihadist influence and undermine broader leadership networks.

### High Profile ISIS Attacks in Libya

Shortly after al-Baghdadi formally recognized an ISIS affiliate in Derna, the group sought to demonstrate its growing capacity to terrorize Libya's residents and undermine its institutions, setting the groundwork

to remain and expand in the country.<sup>82</sup> Through spectacular attacks that would make international headlines, the group would not only be able to increase global awareness of its presence in Libya, but also ramp up its recruitment drive. The group seized their opportunity following the death of Nazih Abdul-Hamid Nabih al-Ruqai, also known as Abu Anas al-Libi, in US custody in early January 2015. Al-Libi, a senior al-Qaeda leader, was awaiting trial on charges for his role in the 1998 US embassy bombings. He died of complications from a long-standing Hepatitis C infection.<sup>83</sup> Three weeks after his death, on January 27, 2015, ISIS took responsibility for an attack on the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli, a prominent fixture in the capital that had regularly hosted government officials, Western diplomats, business leaders, and

81 Callum Paton, "New ISIS Leader in Libya – Abdel Qader Al-Najdi Threatens Daesh Invasion of Rome through Africa," *International Business Times*, March 10, 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/new-isis-leader-abdel-qader-al-najdi-threatens-daesh-invasion-rome-through-north-africa-1548697>.

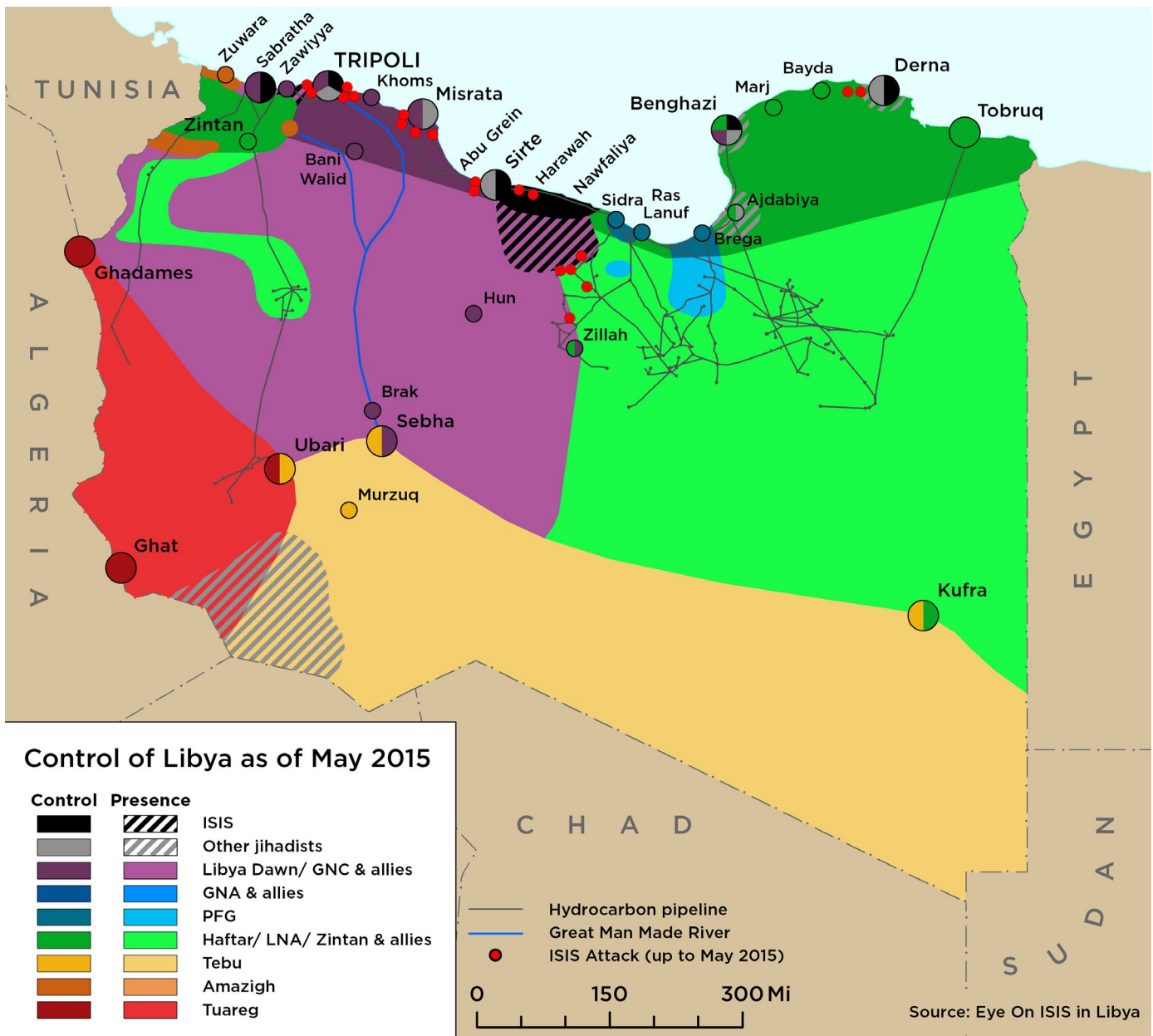
82 "Beheadings, Car Bombings, and the Islamic State's expansion in Libya," *Libyan Institute for Advanced Studies*, June 2015, <https://www.scribd.com/document/267533356/LIAS-Terrorism-in-Libya-020615>.

83 Jomana Karadshah, "Alleged Al-Qaeda Operative Abu Anas Al-Libi Dies in a U.S. Hospital, Family Says," *CNN*, January 3, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/03/us/us-libya-al-libi/>.

## Timeline 2. ISIS in Action

2014		2016	
<b>June</b>	<b>June 27:</b> Prominent civil society activist, Salwa Bughagis, killed	<b>March</b>	<b>Mar 22:</b> After Brussels attacks, videos show ISIS fighters in Sirte distributing celebratory candy
<b>July</b>	<b>July 14:</b> Libyan Brigade sends 50 men to Iraq to support ISIS	<b>April</b>	<b>Apr 5:</b> ISIS attacks al-Beda 47 oil field, demands Sirte residents attend Fajr prayers <b>Apr 14:</b> Heavy fighting between ISIS and PFG on road between Bin Jawad and Sidra
<b>September</b>	<b>Sep 8:</b> HoR moves against the Mufti, adding an overt religious dimension to the HoR/GNC conflict	<b>May</b>	<b>May 9:</b> Surprise ISIS attack on Misratan forces in Abu Grein <b>May 30:</b> Significant gains by Bunyan Marsus (BM) GNA forces reduce ISIS control to 200 km of coast line
<b>November</b>	<b>Nov 3:</b> Shura Council of the Youth of Islam in Derna pledge their allegiance to ISIS	<b>June</b>	<b>June 13:</b> BM forces take full control of Sirte's port <b>June 27:</b> BM estimate only 500-700 ISIS fighters in Sirte
<b>December</b>	<b>Dec 28:</b> Killing of Coptic doctor and daughter in Sirte and attack on Sidra both by ISIS precursor elements	<b>July</b>	<b>July 25:</b> ISIS conducts suicide car bombs in Misratan-controlled areas of Sirte
2015		<b>August</b>	<b>Aug 1:</b> Serraj announces US airstrikes <b>Aug 29:</b> Suicide car bomb attacks reveal ISIS strategy
<b>January</b>	<b>Jan 19:</b> Christians abducted in Sirte	<b>September</b>	<b>Sep 20:</b> Clashes with ISIS fighters south of Sirte
<b>February</b>	<b>Feb 17:</b> ISIS beheads 21 Egyptian Copts	<b>October</b>	<b>Oct 4:</b> Dutch journalist killed by ISIS sniper <b>Oct 18:</b> BM forces declare imminent liberation of Sirte
<b>March</b>	<b>Mar 2:</b> ISIS calls on fighters to come to Libya instead of Syria	<b>November</b>	<b>Nov 22:</b> ISIS posts images of checkpoints south of Sirte
<b>April</b>	<b>Apr 13:</b> ISIS Tripoli wilaya claim attacks against South Korean and Moroccan embassies	<b>December</b>	<b>Dec 20:</b> ISIS attack Man Made River control station
<b>May</b>	<b>May 11:</b> Clashes in Sirte between Misratan 166 and local ISIS cells	2017	
<b>June</b>	<b>June 8:</b> ISIS seizes Harawah and attacks Abu Grein checkpoint	<b>January</b>	<b>Jan 10:</b> Captured ISIS fighters says missing Tunisian journalists killed in Derna <b>Jan 17:</b> ISIS sets up checkpoint in Wadi Bey, hijacks fuel tanker
<b>July</b>	<b>July 13:</b> In Twitter video ISIS acknowledges losses in Derna	<b>February</b>	<b>Feb 21:</b> US says obtained intelligence from ISIS camps hit by airstrikes. Displaced begin return to Sirte.
<b>August</b>	<b>Aug 17:</b> Uprising against ISIS in Sirte	<b>March</b>	<b>Mar 28:</b> US AFRICOM estimates 100-200 ISIS fighters left in Libya
<b>September</b>	<b>Sep 28:</b> ISIS attacks Sidra oil port	<b>April</b>	<b>Apr 25:</b> Libyan ISIS commander, Abdullah Dabbashi, killed in Sabratha
<b>October</b>	<b>Oct 26:</b> Unidentified jets bomb ISIS targets; executions continue in Sirte	<b>May</b>	<b>May 7:</b> ISIS ambushes Misratan fighters south of Abu Grein <b>May 14:</b> ISIS hijacks fuel trucks south of Sirte
<b>December</b>	<b>Dec 7:</b> In Tripoli, pro-GNC militias captured an alleged member of ISIS <b>Dec 15:</b> ISIS features Libya leader in Dabiq; establishes Sirte City Charter		
2016			
<b>January</b>	<b>Jan 12:</b> 3-day ISIS assault on Oil Crescent ports <b>Jan 27:</b> Execution of 25 Sirte residents in the city square		
<b>February</b>	<b>Feb 17:</b> ISIS fights for survival in Benghazi and Derna, consolidating its forces in Sirte and Harwah		

**Map 1. Map showing control of Libya and location of ISIS attacks as of May 2015**



other prominent individuals in Libya. Ten people were killed in the attack, including five foreign nationals, among them an American citizen.<sup>84</sup> The ISIS cells that conducted this attack have never been formally apprehended. They and other ISIS sympathizers most likely persist in the capital to this day.

In December 2014 through January 2015, ISIS fighters kidnapped a number of Egyptian Coptic Christians, who were among the tens of thousands of Egyptian

workers who still came to work in Libya after the 2011 uprisings despite the ongoing instability.<sup>85</sup> Targeted for their religion, these men were used by ISIS in Libya's second, and most spectacular, attack. On February 15, 2015, ISIS released a video depicting the beheading of twenty-one of these individuals on the shores of Sirte.<sup>86</sup> The international reaction to this horrific event was immediate. Egypt launched airstrikes in Derna and

84 Chris Stephen, "Ten Killed as Gunmen Storm Luxury Hotel in Libyan Capital," *Guardian*, January 27, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/27/libya-gunmen-kill-guards-take-hostages-luxury-hotel-tripoli>.

85 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, December 28, 2014, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-28-december-2014/>; Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, January 19, 2015, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-19-january-2015/>.

86 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, February 16, 2015, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-16-february-2015/>.

against ISIS strongholds in Sirte, where the group had been rapidly expanding. But the airstrikes were short-lived. In early March 2015, ISIS attacked eastern oil fields including al-Bahi, al-Mabrouk, al-Ghani, and al-Dahra. These attacks were apparently intended more to ensure continued state weakness in response to the ISIS threat, rather than a high-profile announcement of increased ISIS presence and strength.<sup>87</sup> Although there were few further high-profile attacks, ISIS *wilayat* grew and became more active throughout 2015.

## ISIS Recruitment

In 2015, ISIS began recruiting aggressively to attract foreign fighters to Libya.<sup>88</sup> Over the seven months prior to the attack on the Corinthia Hotel, ISIS had released four videos in which they discussed Libya, albeit tangentially. After the beheadings video was released, ISIS produced six video messages from Libyan affiliates in rapid succession, each focusing on expanding the group's presence in Libya.<sup>89</sup> The proliferation of recruitment videos mirrored the actual expansion that was taking place by ISIS on the ground following these attacks, during the few months that, in hindsight, could be considered the group's zenith as a Libyan territorial entity.<sup>90</sup>

ISIS recruits made up a very small proportion of the Libyan population, but it did not need to recruit the majority of a population to assert its dominance in those areas. Popular rejection of ISIS initially was not enough to prevent ISIS from spreading. Individuals had different motivations for supporting and even joining ISIS. For example, there were families in Misrata who had personal, familial connections to ISIS fighters in Sirte and Benghazi. This may have contributed to Misrata's relatively weak response to ISIS's expansion in Sirte in mid-2015.<sup>91</sup> Others, including individuals with extremist ideological leanings, supported ISIS in Sirte against the "shared enemy" of Haftar, who Grand Mufti Ghariani implied was a greater threat to Libya than ISIS. Furthermore, although the leaders of pre-existing

extremist groups, such as the Derna Mujahadeen Shura Council (DMSC), actively opposed ISIS, many of their members defected to the group including notable figures such as Ansar al-Sharia's spiritual leader Abu Abdullah al-Libi, who swore allegiance to ISIS in March 2015. These high-profile defections, as well as the heavy toll of fighting against Haftar's forces in the east and the sense of confusion following the death in January 2015 of Ansar al-Sharia leader Mohamed al-Zahawi, likely contributed to large-scale defections.<sup>92</sup> ISIS in Sirte is a successor group to Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte, while ISIS in Derna could be seen as a successor group to IYSC and Libyan returnees from the Levant.<sup>93</sup> ISIS has taken advantage of pre-existing tribal and jihadist structures to establish a degree of cohesion and command and control among its local recruits.

For example, in Sabratha—a town near the Tunisian border with a weak local council and lacking an anti-ISIS militia presence—ISIS cells infiltrated the town and used it as a base for moving assets between Tunisia and Libya, making it a key node in global jihadist mobility. Effective resistance only occurred in the aftermath of a US airstrike targeting key leaders in the cell in February 2016.<sup>94</sup> Fighters loyal to the Sabratha Municipal Council finally joined other fighters from Zawiyya, Ajilat, and Surman to counter ISIS, provoking an ISIS backlash against local institutions. Political divisions were bypassed during the battle, as wounded fighters were transferred to rival Zintan, while militias from another rival, Wershefana, opened up the coastal road (which had previously been closed for months) between Tripoli and Zawiyya.<sup>95</sup> Elsewhere, ISIS cells did not engage in such dramatic overreach. In Tripoli, ISIS fighters did not directly attack local institutions, hence local social forces never closed ranks against them.

87 Salem Ali, "Eight guards die as IS attacks fourth oilfield; two foreigners reported abducted," *Libya Herald*, March 6, 2015, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2015/03/06/eight-guards-die-as-is-militants-attack-a-fourth-oilfield/>.

88 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, March 2, 2015, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-2-march-2015/>.

89 See videos from January 27, 2015 onwards: "ISIS Material," Eye on ISIS in Libya, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-materials/>.

90 This pattern of a plethora of recruitment and propaganda videos being released when ISIS's territorial and military fortunes are on the ebb was mirrored in the Levant. Conversely, ISIS's propagandists are still struggling to find the proper rhetorical tropes to reframe the Caliphate narrative in the face of territorial losses.

91 First author conversations with anonymous Misratan militiamen.

92 Frederic Wehrey and Ala' Alrababa'h, "Splitting the Islamists: The Islamic State's Creeping Advance in Libya," Diwan, Carnegie Middle East Center, June 19, 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/60447>; Eye on ISIS in Libya, *Other Jihadist Actors*, March 29, 2015, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/other-jihadist-actors/other-29-march-2015/>.

93 In the early days, when the precursors to ISIS in Sirte members joined the Misratan lead offensive on the oil ports in December 2014 they did so as Ansar al-Sharia. See *ISIS in Action*, Eye on ISIS in Libya, December 28, 2014, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-28-december-2014/>.

94 Ahmed Elumami and Aidan Lewis, "US air raid hits Islamic State in Libya, 43 dead," Reuters, February 19, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/libya-security-idUSKCN0V51A5>.

95 Extended quote from both "The Anti ISIS Coalition," Eye on ISIS in Libya, March 2, 2016, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/the-anti-isis-coalition/anti-2-march-2016/> and *ISIS in Action*, Eye on ISIS in Libya, March 2, 2016, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-2-march-2016/>.

## ISIS's Precarious Headquarters in Derna

Despite the prevalence of jihadist fighters and institutions in Derna, ISIS's presence there was precarious because of the ongoing competition for dominance among extremist groups. In December 2014, shortly after al-Baghdadi recognized the Cyrenaican *wilaya*, jihadist militias opposed to IYSC and ISIS joined together to form the DMSC coalition led by Salim Darbi, head of the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade.<sup>96</sup> Both in the Levant and in Libya, ISIS had aimed to subsume all other jihadist groups, but it failed because its rhetoric and modus operandi put off certain core constituents of the jihadist population—especially those with deeper ties to their host communities and those opposed to ISIS's brutality and *takfiri* practices—a *takfiri* is a Muslim who accuses another Muslim of being an apostate or unbeliever (*kafir*), while *takfir* is the accusation itself. Many of these groups also refused to pledge allegiance to ISIS because of their adherence to al-Qaeda allegiances and theology, as

well as because it was a group imposed on Libya from the outside. Furthermore, although Derna has been a hub of extremist activity for decades, the population was not receptive to ISIS's particularly brutal approach to policing. Notably, foreign interference in Libyan affairs is a particular sensitivity for the population, and the fact that there were foreign fighters entering Derna and imposing foreign governance models on the city outraged many.<sup>97</sup>

ISIS attacks on prominent families and tribal leaders, designed to compel the population to be submissive, provoked residents to flee their homes instead. These tensions came to a head in June 2015 when ISIS killed two top DMSC commanders, Salim Darbi and Nasir Attiyah al-Akar. With local support, the DMSC was then able to drive ISIS largely out of the center of the city before the end of the month.<sup>98</sup> Historical ties between jihadists in Derna and those in Iraq and Syria were not enough to keep ISIS in power there.

96 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, November 3, 2014, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-3-november-2014/>; the DMSC is a conglomeration of extremist militias that have confronted both Haftar's anti-Islamist forces and ISIS in Derna. It may have cooperated with Haftar briefly to expel ISIS in 2015.

97 Nathaniel Barr, "The Islamic State's Uneven Trajectory in Libya," *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume 13, Issue 19, September 17, 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-islamic-states-uneven-trajectory-in-libya/#.V9LsVJMrLsk>.

98 Ibid.

## VI. Sirte: ISIS Seizes Territory in Libya (2015-2016)

### Ripe for the Picking

Once evicted from central Derna in mid-2015, ISIS supporters occupied the peripheral sections of Derna until mid-2016. Rather than losing key commanders in these battles, ISIS was able to evacuate its critical personnel and reconstitute its command structure in a new, arguably stronger, headquarters in Sirte. Unlike Derna, Sirte, as the hometown of the dictator, held a place of privilege among Libyan cities during the Qaddafi regime. But after the 2011 uprisings, it joined Derna as one of a number of cities and towns that failed to be adequately incorporated into new governance structures. Sirte was one of the final pro-Qaddafi holdouts in 2011, and was severely damaged during the final bouts of fighting.<sup>99</sup> The town was also subject to a fairly unique circumstance in post-Qaddafi Libya—its inhabitants were disarmed and its key choke points were occupied by fighters from the victorious (mainly Misratan) militias. Tribes from Sirte such as the Qadhadhfa, Warfalla, and Furjan—all linked to Qaddafi's rule—were discriminated against by the post-Qaddafi authorities who took no care to invest in or administer Sirte, leaving it to fester as a battleground for rival militias.<sup>100</sup> Foreigners also frequently found it difficult to reach Sirte by road or air. As the security situation worsened, foreign embassy officials rarely ventured beyond Tripoli, with the partial exception of the revolutionary cities of Benghazi and Misrata; their absence from the vanquished cities of Bani Walid and Sirte, fueled the perception of isolation in these communities.

From 2013, Sirte experienced its own jihadist/anti-jihadist local conflict between the al-Zawiyya Martyrs Brigade led by Salah Buhliqa from Benghazi and Ansar al-Sharia's Sirte branch (formerly known as al-Faruq brigade) led by Ali al-Teer from Misrata.<sup>101</sup> Buhliqa's forces eventually managed to kill al-Teer, yet, at the end of that year, Buhliqa died in a car accident

leaving his group disorganized and weak.<sup>102</sup> Regional rivalries over control of valuable oil installations in the Oil Crescent and Sirte Basin have compounded the instability around Sirte, most notably during Operation Shuruq (Sunrise) in December 2014, when Misratan and jihadist elements confronted a coalition of easterners including Federalists, Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), and Special Forces (Saiqa) in an attempt to take control of the oil facilities and ports.<sup>103</sup>

Misratan militias used Operation Shuruq to consolidate their control of Sirte, kicking out the remnants of the Buhliqa forces which had become allied to their enemies, the nascent LNA in Benghazi. As a reward for jihadist support against the LNA in the Oil Crescent and in Benghazi, the Misratans essentially handed the security of Sirte over to Ansar al-Sharia.<sup>104</sup> It was at this key moment that jihadist elements faced no opposing forces to challenge their expansion in the city.<sup>105</sup> During this period of occupation, fighters from other hotbeds of jihadism throughout Libya and Africa flocked to the city. Domestically, jihadists came from places like Derna, Benghazi, and Ajdabiya, while large contingents of foreign fighters came mostly from Tunisia in 2014 and early 2015; from late 2015 onward, Boko Haram and other sub-Saharan jihadist groups also sent large contingents to join them.<sup>106</sup> As this process unfolded, the jihadists came to oppose their erstwhile Misratan partners, establishing their own occupation of Sirte.

99 Leo Dobbs, "Displaced Libyans return to rebuild Gaddafi's hometown; face needs," UNHCR, April 16, 2012, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2012/4/4f8c2e7b6/displaced-libyans-return-rebuild-gaddafis-hometown-face-needs.html>.

100 Aref Nayed, "Extremism, Trauma, and Therapy," *Radical Engagement: Essays on Religion, Extremism, Politics, and Libya*, (Abu Dhabi: Kalam Research and Media, 2017), 73-84.

101 "Milishiat Ansar al-Sharia Tashtabak ma'a Jeishna al-Watani," (Arabic) *Tamimi*, April 28, 2013, <http://tamimi.own0.com/t130071-topic>.

102 "Istishaad Amr Ansar al-Sharia b-Sirte wa Qaid Katibat al-Faruq Misrata a'ala yid Katibat min al-Jaysh a-Libi'i Tadum Muwaleen al-Qaddafi," (Arabic) *Wakalat Al-Anbaa al-Islamiya*, August 4, 2013, <https://dawaalhaq.com/post/5206>.

103 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *Anti-ISIS Coalition*, December 14, 2014, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/the-anti-isis-coalition/anti-14-december-2014/>.

104 Skype and email discussions with Suliman Ali Zway of the *New York Times*, March and November 2016.

105 Salem al-Abeydi, "Insihab Latibat Shuhada al-Zaqiya min Sirt ba'ad ta'Urudha li-Hajum Muslih," (Arabic) *Al-Wasat*, March 12, 2014, <http://alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/8365/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%83%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%B6%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%84%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%85-%D9%85%D9%8F%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%AD.htm>.

106 Skype and email discussions with Suliman Ali Zway of the *New York Times*, March and November 2016.



Heavy fighting in Sirte in 2011 left much of the city in ruins. *Photo credit:* European Commission Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection/Flickr.

## Resistance is Futile

Sirte was empty of any national or local authority that could oppose these jihadist incursions. The fact that ISIS was able to conduct more high-profile attacks in the Sirte area, including the killings of the Coptic Christians and early 2015 attacks on oil fields in the Sirte Basin, are clear indications of the relative freedom of movement the group had there as opposed to further east. In this context, ISIS in Sirte gradually took over more and more important civic locations. These included the Ouagadougou Center (the site of many ISIS propaganda videos), the Ibn Sina hospital, and the port. Sirte's wealthiest families fled during this period. Their property was looted and productive industry and farm land was damaged.<sup>107</sup> The group was also emboldened by their defeat of the powerful 166 brigade from Misrata in mid-2015. The Misratan 166 brigade had fought against ISIS in the Sirte area between March and May 2015, but eventually retreated,

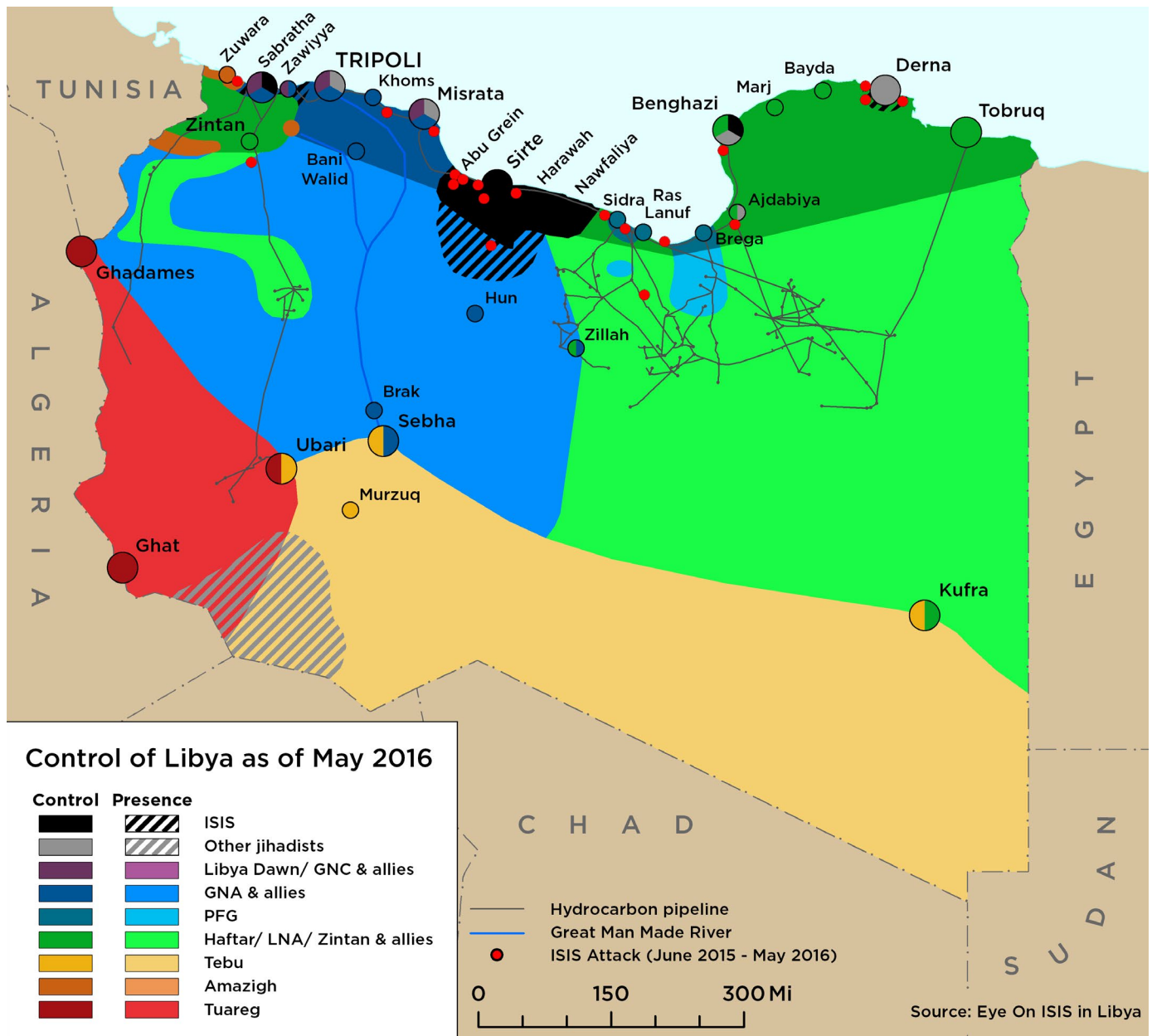
<sup>107</sup> James Roslington and Jason Pack, "Who Pays for ISIS in Libya," Hate Speech International, August 24, 2016, <https://www.hate-speech.org/who-pays-for-isis-in-libya/>.

preferring to focus their efforts on fighting Haftar's forces in the east. The 166 brigade also complained that the contemporary GNC government in Tripoli did not provide them with enough resources to combat ISIS.

One of the most devastating examples of the futility of local resistance to ISIS during the height of its influence was in Sirte, where around 90,000 residents, or roughly 85 percent of the population, fled during ISIS's occupation.<sup>108</sup> ISIS would regularly target residents who they accused of being spies for the Misratan 166th brigade and subject them to gruesome public executions. Resistance to this brutality was repressed, including during moments when the group confronted challenges from the complex tribal landscape. In mid-August 2015, local residents,

<sup>108</sup> "Sirte Displacement: Top Ten Host Communities," International Organization on Migration Displacement Tracking Matrix, Round 4, July 20, 2016, [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Sirte%20displacement%20map\\_20July2016\\_En.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Sirte%20displacement%20map_20July2016_En.pdf). The exact statistics are not known and unknowable. It is possible that fewer people were displaced than the IOM estimate.

**Map 2. Map showing control of Libya and location of ISIS attacks as of May 2016**



mostly from the Furjan tribe, tried to band together and derail ISIS’s attempts at solidifying control over Sirte.<sup>109</sup> The impetus for the rebellion was the murder of local anti-ISIS Salafi cleric Sheikh Khalid bin Rajeb al-Furjani, who was killed during an attempted ISIS abduction.<sup>110</sup> In reaction to the rebellion, ISIS fighters, including members of the Furjan tribe itself, killed

over forty Furjan leaders and supporters, including members of the Warfalla tribe. They also targeted the local rebels by shelling their homes, mostly in the third district of Sirte. They beheaded twelve others and publicly crucified another four to send a graphic message to the rest of the community.<sup>111</sup> As a result, the rebellion was crushed within three days, quashing any

109 Tamer El-Ghobashy and Hassan Morajea, “Islamic State Tightens Grip on Libyan Stronghold of Sirte,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 29, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-entrenches-in-sirte-libya-1448798153>.

110 Mahmoud Al-Salouha, “The Assassination of Salafist Sheikh Khalid Furjani in Sirte,” (Arabic) *Al-Wasat*, August 11, 2015, <http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/85303/>.

111 “Press Briefing Notes on Libya, Syria, and Yemen,” Spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, August 18, 2015, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16329&LangID=E>; Jared Malsin, “ISIS Re-Establish Their Stronghold on Qaddafi’s Home Town after Crushing a Rebellion,” *TIME*, August 19, 2015, <http://time.com/4003049/isis-sirte-rebellion/>.



further public opposition to their rule from the local population.<sup>112</sup>

The brutal repression of the Furjan rebels in Sirte also sent a message to the surrounding areas: it was futile to resist ISIS. By late September 2015, ISIS had established more checkpoints throughout Sirte and had begun requiring shops to close during prayer times and women to appear in public only with a chaperone. In Nufaliya, a small town east of Sirte that the group had captured in February 2015 before entering Sirte itself, ISIS appointed local leadership to manage affairs there. The lack of resistance in satellite villages near Sirte, such as Nufaliya and Hawara, particularly after August 2015, provided ISIS with a buffer to temporarily protect its growing headquarters.

### Militia and Civil Society Disunity

Unfortunately, ISIS's presence in Libya did not initially catalyze a unified military or political response from Libya's myriad factions and militias. Instead, the priority over the period of the rise of ISIS in Sirte in May 2015 to the launch of the Misratan-led al-Bunyan al-Marsus (BM)<sup>113</sup> offensive on Sirte in May 2016, remained the battle between Haftar's anti-Islamist Operation Dignity group and the pro-Islamist Libya Dawn camp.<sup>114</sup> Not only did this internecine fighting prevent progress toward resolving the political legitimacy crisis that had plagued Libya since at least late 2013, but it also allowed ISIS to survive and thrive—sending out sleeper cells to various communities with a high proportion of returnee jihadists from the Levant such as Sabratha and Benghazi.

Just as many local militias had difficulties burying the hatchet to face ISIS, media and civil society organizations were similarly fractured. Local media in Libya engaged in practices that inflamed tensions between rival interest groups and prevented a unified response to the domestic, regional, and global threat of ISIS. According to Freedom House, gaining control over the narratives espoused by media outlets in Libya is a tactic used by rival interest groups to gain an upper hand in the ongoing conflict. Television channels and radio stations have been bullied off the air, journalists replaced with those more sympathetic

to Islamist or anti-Islamist positions, and others have been intimidated and even assassinated for their positions, leading to pervasive censorship and inflammatory rhetoric.<sup>115</sup> The media and civil society sectors have not however been able, at least publicly, to band together and formulate a cohesive strategy to combat ISIS propaganda.

### ISIS State-Building Activities

Libya has hosted various extremist groups for decades and for these groups, Libya served as a safe haven from which they could plot attacks against Western states and their regional allies.<sup>116</sup> By contrast, ISIS in Libya saw value in expanding territorial control within Libya itself and establishing state-like financial institutions, rather than just using the country's vast ungoverned spaces as a base from which to attack Western interests and assets. In the ISIS-controlled territories in Libya, the group destroyed Sufi shrines, implemented harsh punishments such as beheadings, crucifixion, and amputations and forced residents to participate in indoctrination forums and extreme religious observances.<sup>117</sup> Ansar al-Sharia's branches in Libya had sought to provide services and implement their strict brand of law and order in areas under their control in the past, providing a foundation upon which ISIS could build.<sup>118</sup> Once Sirte became ISIS's headquarters in Libya in mid-2015, the group evolved to conduct truly state-like functions: collecting taxes and providing public services, cleaning streets, ensuring grocery stores were stocked, and recruiting doctors, engineers, and lawyers to help run the new "state."<sup>119</sup> UN Special Envoy Martin Kobler remarked prior to the coalition assault on Sirte that ISIS had the most well-developed governance model of any group in Libya.<sup>120</sup> Because there was no strong central

112 "Report of the Secretary-General on the United National Support Mission in Libya," UN Security Council, February 25, 2016, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/182](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2016/182).

113 The phrase derives from a Quranic passage. The term is poetic and its meaning is frequently translated into English as "solid structure" or "steadfast wall."

114 Study of the Anti-ISIS coalition posts and timeline highlights this dynamic, Eye on ISIS in Libya, *The Anti-ISIS Coalition*, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/category/the-anti-isis-coalition/>.

115 "Freedom of the Press 2015: Libya," Freedom House, 2015, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2015/libya>.

116 Joachim Dagenborg and Lamine Chikhi, "Algeria's In Amenas Gas Plant Returning to Normal After Attack," Reuters, September 1, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-statoil-bp-algeria-idUSKBN0GW2N820140901>.

117 Sudarsan Raghavan, "Inside the Brutal but Bizarrely Bureaucratic World of the Islamic State in Libya," *Washington Post*, August 23, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/murders-taxes-and-a-dmv-how-isis-ruled-its-libyan-stronghold/2016/08/22/2ce3b8f4-5e60-11e6-84c1-6d27287896b5\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/murders-taxes-and-a-dmv-how-isis-ruled-its-libyan-stronghold/2016/08/22/2ce3b8f4-5e60-11e6-84c1-6d27287896b5_story.html).

118 Aaron Y Zelin, "The Islamic State's Burgeoning Capital in Sirte, Libya," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 6, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-burgeoning-capital-in-sirte-libya>.

119 Ibid. For more on ISIS finances and administrative model see the below section, "The Financial Dimension of ISIS in Libya."

120 Rod Nordland and Nour Youssef, "Libya: Unified against ISIS, Fragmented After," *New York Times*, September 3, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/04/world/middleeast/libya-unified-against-isis-fragmented-after.html>.

government in Libya to confront this type of organized territorial form of extremism, ISIS was permitted to survive and thrive.

ISIS also understood that the rise of any functional rival governance entity would embattle its progress. As such, it sought to expand outward and build its state, finances, and governance capacity. It also targeted the nascent UN-backed GNA by seeking to undermine its resources and support. For example, in early January 2016, ISIS conducted a major attack against a military training center in Zliten, west of Tripoli, and also attacked checkpoints near Libya's most important pieces of oil infrastructure in Ras Lanuf and Sidra—hoping to deny both army recruits and possible oil export revenue to the nascent GNA.<sup>121</sup>

“ISIS also understood that the rise of any functional rival governance entity would embattle its progress.”

## ISIS Financing

Initially, ISIS had sufficient capital to support new activities in Libya. In both the Levant and its satellites in Libya, ISIS's territorial model of control depended upon loot, taxes, smuggling, corruption, and coerced donations. ISIS's governance template did not foster positive-sum economic growth. ISIS never controlled Libya's oil. Rather, its extractive approach to financing depended on acquiring progressively more territory to tax and plunder—a fact that would hinder the group's ability to resist the anti-ISIS offensive in Sirte in mid-2016, discussed below.

“According to Western intelligence, the initial expansion of ISIS into Libya was dependent on seed funding from ISIS in Syria and Iraq, which provided “millions” to Wissam Najm Abd Zayd al-Zubaydi, an Iraqi commander also known as Abu Nabil al-Anbari,

to fund the creation of the Libyan branch of ISIS in Derna. This capital injection is likely to have provided the financial bedrock for the advances of 2014-15, when ISIS cells moved into locations in Derna, al-Bayda, Benghazi, Sirte, al-Khoms, and Tripoli itself. Additional seed capital is believed to have come from the hijacking of a Central Bank of Libya van containing 55 million in US Dollars and Libyan currency in Sirte in October 2013 by Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte, a militant group initially aligned with Misrata but later subsumed by ISIS.”<sup>122</sup>

Another source of start-up capital for ISIS was the Libyan state payroll. In Sirte, in particular, many of ISIS's initial members drew state salaries due to their membership in various state-funded Islamist revolutionary militias.<sup>123</sup> Even after joining ISIS, this nucleus of fighters managed to remain on the state payroll due to poor public financial management practices and possibly intimidation of finance officials. Another source of funding came from seizing the property of fleeing residents and distributing it among ISIS's fighters. ISIS imposed a tax on commercial properties, confiscating buildings for which tax had not been paid. Although this extractive system was far less developed than in Iraq and Syria, it is believed that by late August 2015, all shops in Sirte were paying a tax to ISIS.<sup>124</sup> It also relied on social media to promote its *zakat* (or Islamic charity/taxation) program.<sup>125</sup> Additionally, ISIS began charging road tolls on traffic along the east-west coastal highway (al-Tariq al-Sahili) that runs through Sirte and the road heading south towards Sabha.<sup>126</sup>

121 International Crisis Group, “The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset,” Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report, No. 170, November 4, 2016, 7.

122 This section and other areas treating finances derive from a modified version of the argument, including some extended quotes, from Roslington and Pack, “Who Pays for ISIS in Libya,” Hate Speech International.

123 First author discussion with the anonymous Libyan sources relied upon in the Eye on ISIS project.

124 “*Tanzim al-Dawla fi Libiya*,” (Arabic) *Akbar Libya*, August 25, 2015, cited in Geoffrey Porter, “How realistic is Libya as an Islamic state ‘fallback?’” CTC Sentinel, March 17, 2016; “Establishing a New Social Contract for Sirte,” Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, December 15, 2015, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-15-dec-2015/>.

125 For more on the propaganda surrounding ISIS's supposedly Sharia-compliant ways of raising money, consult Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, March 2, 2016, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-2-march-2016/>.

126 Personal communication, *UNSMIL*, February 4, 2016, cited in Porter, “How realistic is Libya as an Islamic State ‘fallback?’”

## VII. Slow Western Response (2014-2015)

### Early Prioritization of the National Over the Local

Since the 2011 uprisings against Qaddafi, Western governments and the UN have focused on developing relationships primarily with national-level interlocutors, reflecting Western governments' relative comfort working with state—as opposed to non-state—actors. Foreign capitals urged Libya's successive transitional governments to focus on elections, reconstruction, economic development, and the strengthening of national security institutions, including a national army and police force. While seemingly sensible areas of focus,<sup>127</sup> Libyan governments and foreign missions assumed that these matters should be handled at a national level. Yet, meaningful authority in Libya had largely devolved to the local level. While the series of national governments failed to achieve even minor accomplishments, some local authorities, notably in places like Misrata and Tobruq, made dramatic progress on reconstruction and building a coherent security infrastructure.<sup>128</sup> Libya was able to hold elections in ninety-four municipalities between 2012–2014, which often gave these local governments more legitimacy than the central government.<sup>129</sup>

Early, robust international support could have reinforced local authorities in their quest to fill political and security vacuums in which ISIS ultimately thrived.<sup>130</sup> Yet, international institutions did not invest in building the capacity of local governance structures, nor did they ensure that municipal governments had budgetary authority, even though these entities were often responsible for the provision of local public goods and services, including security. Underpinning

this approach was the significant drain that militia and government salaries had on the national budget, a lack of political agreement over how to divide funds between municipalities, and an assumption that national bureaucrats were more competent than municipal bureaucrats. Furthermore, after Qaddafi's deliberately dysfunctional *Jamahirriyan* centralizing efforts, there were no strong institutional mechanisms to facilitate budget allocation to the local level, even if national governments in Tripoli had been inclined to do so.<sup>131</sup> Most municipal councils never received any money beyond what they could raise themselves. Therefore, although some efforts were made by Libyan central authorities and Western governments to work with municipal councils, their effectiveness was limited.

Instead, the Sisyphean task of building a strong central government from the ground up continued as frustrations boiled over across the country. Given the paralysis and eventual fragmentation of national-level authorities in 2014, cities without substantial local revenue from ports, smuggling, or commerce sank into poverty and malaise, making them vulnerable to extremist groups.

### Shift to Improving Security

Following a series of attacks on Western interests in Libya in 2012, and successful parliamentary elections the same year, foreign capitals began shifting their focus from promoting democratic transition to improving security in Libya.<sup>132</sup> However, these security initiatives faced the same core issue as previous Libyan-led efforts had—namely, the difficulty of integrating fighters, whose first allegiance was to self-contained local militias, into a coherent national force.

The new initiative was championed at the Group of Eight summit in Northern Ireland in June 2013, as a collaboration between various Western governments

127 The international community's push for early elections was understood to be too soon by many observers and participants. For more see, Jason Pack and Haley Cook, "The July 2012 Libyan Elections and the Origin of Post-Qaddafi Appeasement," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 69, No. 2, (Spring 2015), 171-198.

128 Jason Pack and Mohamed Eljarh, "Localizing Power in Libya" Atlantic Council, November 26, 2013, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/articles/localizing-power-in-libya>; "The Can Do City," *Economist*, October 3, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/business/21587264-entrepreneurs-libyas-commercial-hub-are-undeterred-post-war-chaos-can-do-city/>.

129 Interview with senior municipal elections official, October 11, 2016.

130 Nate Mason, "Oil and Power in the New Libya," Atlantic Council, November 5, 2013, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/oil-and-power-in-the-new-libya>.

131 *Jamahirriya* is usually translated as "state of the masses." It is the term coined by Qaddafi to describe the system of governance he established in Libya from 1977 onwards, which he claimed vested power in the masses through direct democracy. In reality, the *Jamahirriyya* system hollowed out Libya's state institutions, vesting power directly in Qaddafi's hands.

132 Missy Ryan, "Libyan Force was a Lesson in the Limits of U.S. Power," *Washington Post*, August 5, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/a-security-force-for-libya-becomes-a-lesson-in-failure/2015/08/05/70a3ba90-1b76-11e5-bd7f-4611a60dd8e5\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/a-security-force-for-libya-becomes-a-lesson-in-failure/2015/08/05/70a3ba90-1b76-11e5-bd7f-4611a60dd8e5_story.html).

### Timeline 3. Western Response

2014		2016	
<b>June</b>	<b>June 27:</b> Tarek Mitri, head of UNSMIL, praises the well-run HoR election	<b>June</b>	<b>June 20:</b> Operation Sophia gets approval to inspect vessels off Libyan coast
<b>August</b>	<b>Aug 25:</b> Libya's neighbors hold Cairo conference	<b>July</b>	<b>July 25:</b> 3 French Special Forces soldiers killed in downing of LNA helicopter in Benghazi
<b>September</b>	<b>Sept 29:</b> UN sponsored Ghadames talks	<b>August</b>	<b>Aug 1:</b> US launches campaign of airstrikes against ISIS in Sirte
<b>November</b>	<b>Nov 3:</b> ISIS established in Derna; Thinni refuses to negotiate with 'terrorists'	<b>August</b>	<b>Aug 29:</b> West reiterates GNA sole legitimate power after HoR votes against it
	<b>Nov 17:</b> Tweets sent by ISIS claim responsibility for bombings at embassies in Tripoli	<b>September</b>	<b>Sept 20:</b> International community welcomes resumption of oil exports
	<b>Nov 30:</b> UN blacklists Ansar Sharia	<b>October</b>	<b>Oct 11:</b> European countries welcome Haftar's envoys
2015		<b>October</b>	<b>Oct 25:</b> US ramps up airstrikes in Sirte
<b>January</b>	<b>Jan 19:</b> UN talks open in Geneva	<b>November</b>	<b>Nov 27:</b> Haftar visits Moscow to request support and arms
<b>February</b>	<b>Feb 16:</b> Italy says ready to fight ISIS in context of international mission	<b>December</b>	<b>Dec 19:</b> US AFRICOM announces the conclusion of Operation Odyssey Lightning
<b>March</b>	<b>Mar 29:</b> UN extends arms embargo	2017	
<b>June</b>	<b>June 15:</b> US airstrike targets Belmokhtar	<b>January</b>	<b>Jan 10:</b> Italian ambassador returns to Libya
<b>November</b>	<b>Nov 16:</b> First US airstrike in Derna kills top ISIS leader	<b>January</b>	<b>Jan 19:</b> US jets destroy 2 ISIS camps south of Sirte using precision-guided bombs
<b>December</b>	<b>Dec 22:</b> Reports of unidentified surveillance aircraft over Sirte	<b>February</b>	<b>Feb 7:</b> Serraj signs MoU on migration with Italy
2016		<b>February</b>	<b>Feb 14:</b> US vetoes appointment of former Palestinian PM Salam Fayyad as new UN Libya Envoy
<b>January</b>	<b>Jan 27:</b> US Joint Chiefs advocate intervention in Sirte	<b>March</b>	<b>Mar 21:</b> The League of Arab States, the African Union, the EU and the UN establish Libya quartet
<b>February</b>	<b>Feb 9:</b> Italians mentioned by US as lead on Sirte Intervention	<b>April</b>	<b>Apr 19:</b> US Treasury sanctions Libyan financial facilitators of ISIS
<b>March</b>	<b>Mar 22:</b> Italians prepare to provide 5000 troops for Libya	<b>May</b>	<b>May 2:</b> Serraj briefly meets Trump
<b>April</b>	<b>Apr 14:</b> Italian FM visits GNA in Tripoli, first visit by European diplomat since 2014	<b>May</b>	<b>May 30:</b> Egypt launches airstrikes in Derna and Jufra in retaliation for ISIS attack in Egypt
<b>May</b>	<b>May 16:</b> Western powers agree to supply GNA with weapons and training to fight ISIS		
	<b>May 30:</b> British Special Forces help destroy ISIS suicide vehicles in Sirte		

to create and train a national army called the General Protection Force (GPF).<sup>133</sup> Some international contributors to the GPF effort insisted Libya pay for the training up-front, despite the fact that Libyan interlocutors were either unable or unwilling to secure the funds. However, several states attempted training programs without advance payment, including Italy, Turkey, Jordan, and the United Kingdom (UK), by bringing recruits overseas for training. The British program conducted at RAF Bassingbourne had to be dismantled after Libyan cadets rioted and were arrested on charges of rape in Cambridge.<sup>134</sup> The same fate occurred to the training programs established in Jordan and in Turkey. The only successful training program was the one held in Cassino, Italy—due to the exceptionally good vetting process conducted by the Italians in the selection of the trainees. Special forces training at Watiya airbase, which focused on Zintani militiamen in 2012–2013, was attacked by a rival militia that stole weapons and equipment.<sup>135</sup> There was little appetite within the international community (or in Libya for that matter) for the deeper involvement that may have been required for success, including boots on the ground and extensive defense institution building. Even beyond the failings in practice, in Turkey and Italy planned assistance was poorly conceived. Upon their return to Libya, the graduates could not be absorbed into a national army. There was often no command structure or designated base to which they should report. Consequently, graduates frequently returned to their original militias. The GPF was not the only international security program that faltered in Libya. Potentially valuable special forces and border security force training efforts fizzled after brief moments of promise.

While the Libyan national government struggled to function, local militias across the country wielded actual power, and thrived on the Hobbesian struggle with their counterparts. They decided when oil could flow, planes could take off, border crossings could be opened, and when the national government was allowed to meet and pass laws. Western governments did not absorb quickly enough the reality that national-level interlocutors were too weak or corrupt to guarantee the success of such ambitious projects,

133 Chris Stephen and Ewen MacAskill, “Cameron’s plan to train Libyan soldiers had makings of disaster from the start,” *Guardian*, November 4, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/04/cameron-plan-train-libyan-soldiers-problems-money>.

134 “Libyan soldiers ‘raped man in Cambridge after leaving barracks,’” *BBC*, May 6, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-32610470>.

135 “Libyan rebels stole hundreds of US-supplied weapons: report,” *Al Akhbar*, May 27, 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/19934>.

and constantly urged their embassies to encourage one or another Libyan ministry to take various actions, which they were incapable of implementing. Acknowledging that there was no real government to work with may have required international capitals to commit to filling the void in post-conflict Libya in a more comprehensive manner than they—or their citizenry—were willing to accept, particularly given a decade of failed nation-building in Iraq.

### **Recognition of Unity Government Legitimizes Western Counter-Terror Support**

After the split between the GNC and the HoR in 2014, Western governments focused their efforts on re-establishing a single central government in Tripoli. Even after the LPA was signed in December 2015, amending the August 2011 Temporary Constitutional Declaration and creating the Presidential Council (PC), an empowered unity government has been elusive. Despite the UN’s efforts to conclude a genuine compromise, the GNA failed to unify what had become an east/west split, especially as it seemed to limit the role Haftar could play in any future government, which was unacceptable for many easterners.<sup>136</sup> The PC presented its cabinet list for the GNA to the HoR for ratification twice in 2016. However, after months of delaying the vote, the HoR rejected the proposed lists, and by April 2016, regional and international efforts to bring rival parties together to discuss amendments to the LPA had not borne fruit.

ISIS’s presence grew during the course of the lengthy months of negotiations in 2015, but the international community still largely agreed that an effective, reunified central government was the sine qua non for initiating an anti-ISIS fight, despite evidence suggesting that local councils were viewed as the most legitimate governing bodies in Libya and could have been empowered to tackle ISIS themselves.<sup>137</sup> The moment Libyan leaders signed the LPA, the international community was eager to provide long-promised counter-terrorism assistance to their new, unified (if not locally recognized) interlocutors. No overt anti-ISIS, Western-backed military operations were initiated until the unity government was in place, as Western capitals did not want to be perceived by

136 “The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset,” The International Crisis Group, November 4, 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/libyan-political-agreement-time-reset>.

137 “Libya Poll: High Confidence in Legitimacy of Local Councils, Despite Poor Outreach by Local Governments,” International Republican Institute, November 9, 2016, <http://www.iri.org/resource/libya-poll-high-confidence-legitimacy-local-councils-despite-poor-outreach-local>.



UN-backed fighters carry a girl rescued from ISIS-held territory as anti-ISIS forces clear the final district of the group's stronghold of Sirte, Libya. *Photo credit: Reuters/Hani Amara.*

domestic and international audiences as interfering on one side of the conflict or another. With the unity government in place after the Skhirat Agreement of December 2015, actions in Libya could be billed as “invited” support missions that were answering Libyan requests for help. The first example of this was in the western coastal city of Sabratha, where targeted US airstrikes in February 2016 scattered a growing ISIS cell.<sup>138</sup> The airstrikes in Sabratha in part targeted Nouredine Chouchane, a Tunisian foreign fighter accused of having organized the Bardo Museum attack and the Sousse beach resort attack in Tunisia in 2015. With Chouchane dead after the attack, and Sabratha free of ISIS control at least temporarily, ISIS suffered a blow to its ability to attract foreign fighters from Tunisia and launch attacks throughout the region.

Tensions existed between foreign ministries that insisted on protecting the political settlement process

<sup>138</sup> Ahmed Elumami and Aidan Lewis, “U.S. Air Strike Hits Islamic State in Libya, 43 Dead,” Reuters, February 19, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/libya-security-idUSKCN0V51A5>.

above all else, and the security structures that watched ISIS’s spread with deep concern. In the United States, this tug of war between the Pentagon and the State Department was pronounced; similar dynamics existed between the French Hexagone Balard and the Quai d’Orsay. The GNA remained the focus of Western diplomatic efforts, but quiet, direct support for groups fighting ISIS existed concurrently.<sup>139</sup> This covert military assistance was likely initiated as early as late 2014, with public evidence of it only available when special forces operators are killed in action or when rumors of activities are mentioned in the Arabic media.<sup>140</sup> Western powers have also provided support to rival factions in Libya despite public insistence on support to the GNA. France is the most notable for being

<sup>139</sup> Eye on ISIS in Libya, *Western Response*, May 30, 2016, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/western-response/western-30-may-2016/>.

<sup>140</sup> Chris Stephen, “Three French special forces soldiers die in Libya,” *Guardian*, July 20, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/20/three-french-special-forces-soldiers-die-in-libya-helicopter-crash>.

overtly caught simultaneously aiding both Haftar and his Misratan opponents.<sup>141</sup>

## Western Cooperation with Armed Groups

This shift from remaining aloof in the 2012–2015 period to Western cooperation with Libyan armed groups from 2016 to present is one of ISIS's greatest impacts on Western policy toward Libya. This new approach reflects not just an immediate concern about ISIS, but a longer-term fear that Libya will fail completely as a state, taking with it the illusion of national-level interlocutors. Such a collapse would make combating ISIS and other jihadists across the country almost impossible. Rather than attempting to build up institutions before the GNA is officially recognized by the HoR, Western defense institutions, especially US Africa Command (AFRICOM), have sought a compromise, providing direct support to the nominally pro-GNA militias under the pretext that Libya's "internationally recognized government" requested this support. This approach appeared to be the most prudent way to extend the global anti-ISIS campaign to Libya using the familiar methodology of airstrikes supporting an allied local ground force. Yet, the new Western focus on working more closely with pro-GNA militias is not a substitute for the more robust central and local institution building that is necessary for long-term stability. Mirroring this trend, Russia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have increased their training, arming, and logistical support to Haftar's LNA—occasionally conducting airstrikes on its behalf just as the United States has done for the GNA.

The ever-shifting rostrum of GNA-aligned and anti-GNA but ardently anti-ISIS militias, combined with the fleeting and often illusory nature of legitimacy in Libya, means that different international actors are able to pick and choose whichever militias best serve

their foreign policy interests. As a result, Western efforts to back the GNA and other political settlement processes that could foster increased security have been consistently stymied by interference from other external actors pursuing their own interests, often by engaging in a proxy war to empower rival interest groups. Egypt, the UAE, and Russia have all provided military or political support to Haftar despite UN efforts to bestow sole legitimacy on the GNA.<sup>142</sup> On the other hand, there have been reports that Qatar and Turkey have provided different forms of support to pro-Islamist militias, some of whom are aligned with the GNA. On the practical side of arms and training, the pro-Haftar powers have been far more involved as, since 2015, Qatar and Turkey have curtailed their earlier arms shipments but may have resumed them to the Benghazi Defense Brigades (BDB) in 2017. Egyptian military support specifically has been robust,<sup>143</sup> and even some Western countries have allegedly provided covert military assistance in the LNA's effort to take control of Benghazi from jihadist militias.<sup>144</sup> Even if such militias are allied to the internationally recognized government, they still remain similarly unaccountable to anyone, raising the risks of working with them. These risks may partly explain why Italy has not fulfilled its offer to dedicate more resources, including thousands of troops, to Libya.<sup>145</sup>

141 Jacopo Barigazzi, "Diplomatic divide over Libya threatens EU unity on defense," *Politico*, October 11, 2016, <http://www.politico.eu/article/accusations-of-french-ambiguity-in-libya-show-difficult-eu-security-integration/>; "Libyan renegade general hails support of Egyptian leadership," *Middle East Eye*, September 21, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/renegade-general-haftar-admits-receiving-support-egyptian-leadership-662681585>.

142 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *Western Response*, July 4, 2016, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/western-response/western-4-july-2016/>.

143 Nicholas Linn, "Egypt's Got Plans for Libya," Medium, December 5, 2015, <https://medium.com/@warisboring/egypt-s-got-plans-for-libya-ab1e9882cf13#ebj2hjhr1>.

144 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *Other Jihadist Actors*, July 25, 2016, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/other-jihadist-actors/other-25-july-2016/>.

145 "Italy took the lead in establishing the Libyan International Assistance Mission (LIAM) in early 2016. Intended as a coordinating body for all international efforts to train Libyan forces, it has remained largely defunct. Rome reduced earlier offers to train council-allied forces, when parliament agreed in September only to send 300 military [sic] (in rotation) to guard an Italian military field hospital in Misrata. At UK, U.S. instigation, NATO has offered to be more involved, but no concrete plans have materialized." International Crisis Group, *The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset*, Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report, No. 170, November 4, 2016, 23.

## VIII. The Battle for Sirte (2016)

### Formation of an Anti-ISIS Coalition to Attack Sirte

On May 5 and 6, 2016, ISIS fighters carried out two suicide bombings against Misratan Military Council forces at Abu Grein, a village situated roughly halfway between Misrata and Sirte, killing several Misratans. This was the first time ISIS had threatened to extend their influence westward into Misratan-held territory.<sup>146</sup> It appears this attack, and the direct threat posed by ISIS's proximity to Misrata, finally provoked Misratan militias to launch a concerted counter-offensive against ISIS. As a result, Misratan militias joined the Misrata-Sirte Operations Room (which became al-Bunyan al-Marsus, BM) which was established by the PC following the Abu Grein attack to coordinate military operations against ISIS in Sirte; in reality, the PC had little power over these militias even though they were nominally subsumed in the Operations Room umbrella group. Although the interests of both Misrata and the GNA were aligned in their desire to drive ISIS out of Sirte, the Misratans did not fight because they had been "ordered to do so," nor necessarily to counter ISIS's brutal ideology and methods of governance. Rather, they fought because defeating ISIS and reclaiming Sirte would increase their own territory and power within Libya and prevent further ISIS incursions into Misratan-held territory. Haftar's response to the implied threat of losing control of the anti-ISIS fight to his rivals was to set up his own, separate anti-ISIS military operations room to coordinate LNA forces southeast of Sirte. The competitive rather than cooperative undercurrents to the battle for Sirte would persist as no genuine coalition of anti-jihadist militias would ever be formed.<sup>147</sup>

When BM forces finally began attacking ISIS after a few weeks of propaganda, they made swift gains, with air support from Misrata allowing ground troops to advance to within 30 km of Sirte from the west and southwest by the end of May.<sup>148</sup> By mid-June,

BM forces had seized the strategic Sirte port, while Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) units under the umbrella of the GNA's Ajdabiyya-Sirte Operations Room had seized the town of Harawah and advanced to within 50 km east of Sirte.<sup>149</sup> However, by the end of June, advances against ISIS had significantly slowed. Although BM forces estimated that only 500-700 ISIS fighters remained in the city at that point, those ISIS fighters were able to use urban guerilla warfare tactics to launch regular suicide and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks against the Misratan forces, killing and injuring hundreds.<sup>150</sup> BM forces surrounded the city, while Libyan naval boats half-heartedly blockaded the port in an attempt to cut off all ISIS's supply routes. It is unclear if the naval siege was ever conceived as comprehensive, given that ISIS fighters continued to have access to food, water, and weapons even though they were pinned into an area only a few square kilometers in area. It is likely that small boats were still able to reach ISIS's enclave as BM's naval capacity is limited and many of the Libyan navy ships do not have functioning radars, meaning smuggling vessels could easily slip in at night. Furthermore, the posturing between local factions prior to the assault on Sirte allowed ISIS to dig in and plant booby traps, while allowing its leaders to flee the city, scattering themselves into preexisting jihadist cells throughout the country.

### Turning Point: US Airstrikes

Increasingly frustrated at their lack of further progress after the initial blitz at the end of May, on July 25, BM forces officially asked the PC to call for US airstrikes.<sup>151</sup> Since the GNA's formation many months earlier, discussion of airstrikes between Prime Minister (PM) Fayez al-Serraj, Western leaders, and Misratan commanders had been ongoing. Pentagon officials had been pushing the White House for months to authorize AFRICOM airstrikes over Sirte and, to force President Obama's reluctant hand, they had discussed the need for them in the press.<sup>152</sup> On August 1, 2016, after Serraj's

146 "Militants stage attacks between Libyan stronghold of Sirte and coastal Misrata," Reuters, May 5, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-idUSKCN0XW1SN>.

147 Jason Pack, "Don't believe Libya's race to Sirte rhetoric," *Middle East Eye*, May 10, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/dont-believe-libyas-race-sirte-rhetoric-690524639>; "The Scramble for Sirte," *Economist*, May 14, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21698671-libyas-armed-groups-take-aim-jihadists-and-each-other-scramble>.

148 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *Anti-ISIS Coalition*, May 30, 2016, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/the-anti-isis-coalition/anti-30-may-2016/>.

149 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, June 13, 2016, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-13-june-2016/>.

150 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, June 27, 2016, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-27-june-2016/>.

151 Jason Pack, "After Sirte, What's Next for ISIS in Libya?" Tony Blair Faith Foundation, August 17, 2016, <http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/after-sirte-whats-next-isis-libya>.

152 Adam Entous and Missy Ryan, "In Libya, United States



## Timeline 4. Anti-ISIS Coalition

2014		2016	
<b>June</b>	<b>June 21:</b> Haftar says ‘terrorists should leave now or die here.’ Mufti calls for anti-Haftar jihad	<b>May</b>	<b>May 9:</b> PC sets up operations room to combat ISIS in Sirte area <b>May 30:</b> BM forces advance to within 30km of Sirte, suffering high casualties
<b>August</b>	<b>Aug 3:</b> BRSC take Saiqa base in Benghazi <b>Aug 25:</b> HoR brands Libya Dawn terrorists	<b>June</b>	<b>June 6:</b> GNA reinstates Jadhraan as head of PFG, advances on Sirte <b>June 20:</b> Mufti says GNA, Haftar and Qaddafi the same after GNA condemned Ajdabiya attack
<b>October</b>	<b>Oct 19:</b> Haftar reverses slide in Benghazi with major offensive	<b>July</b>	<b>July 11:</b> LNA suffers setbacks after suicide attacks, Jadhraan occupies Zueitina port
<b>November</b>	<b>Nov 23:</b> Haftar courts Ferjan tribe of Sirte in Dawn/Dignity wars	<b>August</b>	<b>Aug 22:</b> HoR rejects GNA, tensions grow in Tripoli between rival militias
<b>December</b>	<b>Dec 14:</b> Jihadists in Derna form DMSC; easterners rally to Haftar in response to Operation Shuruq	<b>September</b>	<b>Sept 13:</b> Haftar seizes oil crescent ports from Jadhraan
2015		<b>October</b>	<b>Oct 4:</b> Haftar and LNA continue militarization of eastern Libya <b>Oct 14:</b> Khalifa al-Ghwell seizes Rixos in Tripoli in coup attempt
<b>February</b>	<b>Feb 16:</b> Egypt bombs ISIS in Derna in retaliation for beheadings; GNC & Misrata condemn ISIS	<b>November</b>	<b>Nov 1:</b> Third Force cede control of Brak al-Shatti to LNA <b>Nov 28:</b> PM Serraj says PC will not submit new cabinet to HoR
<b>March</b>	<b>Mar 9:</b> HoR appoints Haftar as Commander of the Army <b>Mar 28:</b> Misrata tries to dislodge ISIS from Sirte	<b>December</b>	<b>Dec 7:</b> BDB forces attempt to retake oil ports from LNA, LNA extend control to Brak al-Shati
<b>May</b>	<b>May 25:</b> Dignity and Misratan forces conduct joint operation against ISIS near Hawara	2017	
<b>August</b>	<b>Aug 17:</b> Anti-ISIS rebellion in Sirte	<b>January</b>	<b>Jan 3:</b> PC deputy prime minister for South Musa al-Koni resigns <b>Jan 31:</b> Dialogue group agree in principle amendments to the LPA
<b>September</b>	<b>Sept 28:</b> Heavy fighting in the east, LNA & DMSC cooperate	<b>February</b>	<b>Feb 14:</b> Anti-GNA militias form ‘Libyan National guard’ as tensions rise in Tripoli
<b>November</b>	<b>Nov 23:</b> Assassinations in Ajdabiya; tensions between LNA and PFG	<b>March</b>	<b>Mar 7:</b> GNA condemns BDB takeover of oil crescent ports <b>Mar 21:</b> Pro-GNA militias evict Ghwell from Tripoli
<b>December</b>	<b>Dec 22:</b> Joint Ops Room set up in Sabratha	<b>April</b>	<b>Apr 11:</b> Clashes escalate between LNA and Misratans near Sebha <b>Apr 25:</b> Saleh and Swehli meet in Rome
2016		<b>May</b>	<b>May 23:</b> GNA-affiliated forces kill up to 140 LNA fighters in surprise attack on Brak al-Shatti airbase <b>May 30:</b> Pro-GNA militias evict hard-line anti-GNA militias from Tripoli
<b>January</b>	<b>Jan 5:</b> Jadhraan says Haftar is as bad as ISIS <b>Jan 27:</b> PFG push ISIS back west of Bin Jawad		
<b>February</b>	<b>Feb 3:</b> DMSC capture ISIS cell in Derna		
<b>March</b>	<b>Mar 2:</b> LNA declares Ajdabiya liberated and makes significant gains in Benghazi <b>Mar 29:</b> Misrata militias declare support for GNA		
<b>April</b>	<b>Apr 5:</b> UN-mediated Presidential Council (PC) arrives in Tripoli		

public call for help, AFRICOM launched Operation Odyssey Lightning, aimed at helping the GNA and its militia allies deny ISIS a safe haven in Libya.<sup>153</sup> The result was much faster gains against entrenched opposition in Sirte than had been witnessed in Benghazi, where the international community had officially distanced itself from Haftar's campaign, especially since the formation of the GNA. The rapid progress achieved in Sirte by BM demonstrated the higher value of Western military assistance as opposed to Egyptian and UAE assistance. It also provoked backlash from Haftar's supporters rather than coaxing them to reunification. Haftar had been positioning himself as the best partner for fighting ISIS in Libya in order to press for the UN arms embargo to be lifted in a way that would benefit him. In reaction to US support for Misrata, he intensified his ties to the Kremlin, Egypt, and the UAE.<sup>154</sup>

Although the airstrikes, coupled with support from western special forces and reconnaissance, initially reinvigorated the BM offensive, the dense urban landscape of Sirte meant they did not end ISIS dominance immediately. After seizing the Ouagadougou Center on August 11—which had been ISIS's headquarters in Sirte—BM forces fought a battle of attrition, slowly whittling away ISIS's territorial control and numbers, but suffering heavy losses from retaliatory suicide attacks, IEDs, and sniper fire in the process.<sup>155</sup> In mid-October 2016, the pro-GNA BM forces claimed publicly that ISIS<sup>156</sup> had been defeated militarily in Sirte; however, for the next two months, they continued to fight pockets of ISIS fighters who were entrenched in well-defended, booby-trapped enclaves in the Third Residential area of the city, as well as in recently liberated villages outside Sirte.

The intensity of US and Libyan airstrikes against ISIS positions increased significantly from mid-November, and on December 5, 2016, BM forces officially declared victory against ISIS in Sirte, with the victory

formally recognized by PM Serraj. In mid-November, AFRICOM reported it had carried out nearly 370 airstrikes against enemy targets in Sirte;<sup>157</sup> by the time it announced the conclusion of Operation Odyssey Lightning on December 19, AFRICOM reported that it had conducted a total of 495 precision airstrikes.<sup>158</sup> In the days following the declared victory, BM forces began mopping up operations to clear the city of any remaining fighters, IEDs, booby traps, and bodies with continued support from US airstrikes.<sup>159</sup> In mid-December, the Sirte Municipal Council met in Tripoli to elect a mayor for Sirte; however, the Misratan BM forces felt the mayoral candidate was too pro-Haftar and the next day appointed their own military governor.<sup>160</sup>

Throughout the BM operation in Sirte, the siege on ISIS-controlled areas was occasionally lifted, ostensibly to allow the wives and children of ISIS fighters, as well as other civilians, to leave the embattled areas. Whatever its logic, these moments provided opportunities for key ISIS commanders to resupply and to escape.<sup>161</sup> Indeed, this trend was confirmed in late September, when clashes took place between fleeing ISIS fighters and BM forces south of Sirte in the wake of one of the humanitarian siege easements.<sup>162</sup> In late December, there were reports of ISIS fighters attacking a Man-Made River control station in southern Libya and setting up checkpoints in the area.<sup>163</sup> Then on January 19, 2017—the Obama administration's last day in office—AFRICOM, in conjunction with the GNA, launched airstrikes against two ISIS camps 45 km south of Sirte, reportedly killing as many as ninety ISIS fighters.<sup>164</sup> The head of AFRICOM, Marine Corps General Thomas Waldhauser, estimated in March 2017 that there were 100–200 ISIS fighters left in Libya, who were most likely regrouping in southern Libya,

---

lays plans to hunt down escaped Islamic State fighters," *Washington Post*, November 11, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-libya-united-states-lays-plans-to-hunt-down-escaped-islamic-state-fighters/2016/11/11/97098090-a755-11e6-8fc0-7be8f848c492\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-libya-united-states-lays-plans-to-hunt-down-escaped-islamic-state-fighters/2016/11/11/97098090-a755-11e6-8fc0-7be8f848c492_story.html).

153 "U.S. Airstrikes in Support of the GNA, October 13," U.S. Africa Command Press Release, October 14, 2016, <http://www.africom.mil/media-room/pressrelease/28445/u-s-airstrikes-in-support-of-gna-oct-13>.

154 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *Western Response*, July 4, 2016, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/western-response/western-4-july-2016/>.

155 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, August 15, 2016, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-15-august-2016/>.

156 Hani Amari, "Libyan forces reduce Islamic State's grip in Sirte to final few blocks," Reuters, October 4, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-idUSKCN1241MJ>.

157 "U.S. airstrikes in support of GNA: Nov. 8," US AFRICOM, November 8, 2016, <http://www.africom.mil/media-room/pressrelease/28487/u-s-airstrikes-in-support-of-gna-nov-8>.

158 "AFRICOM Concludes Operation Odyssey Lightning," AFRICOM, December 22, 2016, <http://www.africom.mil/media-room/pressrelease/28564/africom-concludes-operation-odyssey-lightning>.

159 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, December 6, 2016, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-6-dec-16/>.

160 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, December 13, 2016, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/bm-forces-sweep-sirte-for-isis-fighters-mines/>.

161 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, August 29, 2016, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-29-august-2016/>.

162 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, September 20, 2016, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-20-sept-16/>.

163 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, January 3, 2017, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/reports-of-isis-presence-in-southern-libya/>.

164 "US conducts airstrikes on Daesh camps in Libya," AFRICOM, January 19, 2017, <http://www.africom.mil/media-room/pressrelease/28594/us-conducts-air-strikes-on-daesh-camps-in-libya>.

and stressed that even with the success of Sirte, ISIS in Libya remains a regional threat.<sup>165</sup> Waldhauser also said that the United States would maintain a force to work with the GNA if more action was needed.<sup>166</sup>

### The Dangers of Supporting a Military Coalition Without Political Unity

Despite its clear military logic and record of qualified success, continued US support to the nominally GNA-aligned militias is fraught with strategic, political, and security risks. As no genuine, political anti-ISIS coalition was formed before the fight for Sirte began, the continued support of these forces, now that the main aim of the operation has been achieved, could shift the balance between factions on the ground and risk sparking greater conflict.<sup>167</sup> The contingent of Misratan militias supporting Khalifa al-Ghwell's anti-GNA faction in Tripoli, and the involvement of some Misratans in the BDB's offensives against the LNA in the Oil Crescent in December 2016 and March 2017, are indicative of this threat.<sup>168</sup> Yet, to abandon these militias when they have lost so many lives to this fight is also dangerous. It is possible that such an action would facilitate certain subsets of BM fighters, jaded and exhausted after months of deadly fighting, to defect to anti-Western jihadist-aligned militias. Furthermore, the pro-GNA elements fighting ISIS in Sirte are not a discrete unit; there are many divisions among them, along religious, political, and tribal lines.<sup>169</sup> Now that the battle for Sirte is concluded, internal Misratan alliances are under strain and are beginning to fracture, as different factions take different stances toward the governance of Sirte, Haftar, control of the Oil Crescent, and the GNA.

At the time of writing, security and governance in Sirte was a source of ongoing contention as Misrata seeks to prevent Haftar from capitalizing on their hard-won victory; at the same time, Sirte's tribal elders and citizens accuse the Misratans of looting

and seizing property in the city, and preventing some residents from returning to their houses. Furthermore, heightened hostilities between Haftar and the GNA in the Oil Crescent, following the LNA's unexpected defeat at the hands of the BDB on March 3, 2017, mean Sirte risks becoming a dangerous no-man's land and buffer zone once more. The LNA retook the Oil Crescent on March 14, 2017, and has since pushed south and west, engaging in direct combat with Misratan forces around Brak al-Shatti and Temenhint airbases. The conflict escalated further in mid-May after the GNA-aligned Misratan Third Force and the BDB launched a surprise attack against Brak al-Shatti, killing up to 140 LNA fighters who were stationed there.<sup>170</sup> Political reconciliation efforts between Serraj and Haftar throughout May 2017 also sparked a backlash against the GNA in Tripoli, with militias opposed to Haftar threatening to overthrow the GNA. The disarray in post-ISIS Sirte highlights the importance of having a political coalition in place to underpin and structure the outcome of any anti-ISIS military coalition; otherwise, the political vacuum that allowed ISIS to thrive in the first place will persist.

As these events clearly demonstrate, the fall of Sirte does not represent the defeat of ISIS, nor end the threat of other jihadist groups hijacking Libya's post-Qaddafi transition, nor does the removal of ISIS from Sirte solve the city's concerns over governance, security, and marginalization. As this report has made clear, jihadist groups have been woven into Libya's post-Qaddafi pattern of appeasement, deputization of militias, and statelessness. Only attempts to combat those issues, rather than simply to push ISIS out of specific territories, would be treating the root cause of the problem.

### Parallels with Mosul

Striking parallels can be drawn between the Sirte offensive and the one against ISIS in Mosul, which began in October 2016, six months after the offensive against Sirte. In the Mosul theater, various Shia militias are fighting against ISIS under the umbrella group Hashd al-Sha'abi. Although they are on the same side as the Iraqi government, this does not imply that they are actually taking orders from it. As with al-Bunyan al-Marsus in Libya, Hashd al-Sha'abi in Iraq are not truly under the command of the government nor are they one united Shia force; rather, just like BM, they are a loose coalition of different militias whose interests currently coalesce but could easily diverge when circumstances change. They are fighting with the aim

165 Eric Schmitt, "Warnings of a 'Powder Keg' in Libya as ISIS Regroups," *New York Times*, March 21, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/21/world/africa/libya-isis.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/21/world/africa/libya-isis.html?_r=0). We do not give credence to this estimate, as there is no scientific way to quantify the existing number of ISIS fighters post-Sirte (even for DoD).

166 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *ISIS in Action*, March 28, 2017, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/22-28-mar-us-will-maintain-force-in-libya-to-counter-isis/>.

167 Ibid.

168 Jason Pack, "With IS Expelled From Libya's Sirte, What Come's Next?" *Al Monitor*, December 14, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2016/12/libya-misrata-sirte-gna-battle-isis-paradox.html>.

169 Frederic Wehrey, "Quiet No More?" Diwan, Carnegie Middle East Center, October 13, 2016, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64846?lang=en>.

170 "Libya death toll 'rises to 140' at Brak El-Shati airbase," BBC, May 20, 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-39983806>.

of seizing greater power for themselves, Iran, and Iraqi Shia communities in the aftermath of the battle.<sup>171</sup> Just as the residents of Sirte risk feeling marginalized under a Misrata-dominated military government in their city post-ISIS, the Sunni residents of Mosul risk being marginalized in the absence of a clear political plan post-ISIS.<sup>172</sup>

Consequently, both in Libya and Iraq, Western nations must exert extreme caution when continuing to support anti-ISIS coalitions of militias, which have no underlying political agreement governing their temporary military alliance. When the battle is over, these fragile alliances will almost certainly fall apart, prolonging the vacuums that allowed ISIS to exist in these areas in the first place.<sup>173</sup> Should Western

nations decide to support certain groups as part of the global priority to rid the world of ISIS, they should also identify incentive structures for each of these coalitions and their members to determine how best to push all sides to compromise, inclusiveness, and proper government after the military battle is won.

More focused diplomatic capital should be expended to incentivize genuine political coalitions and, when the opportunity presents itself, shared opposition to the systematic spoiling activities of jihadists should be used as a lever to cement real political alliances and grand bargains between factions. In this way, the war against ISIS could have been used as the turning point to finally forge a post-Qaddafi coalition capable of stopping the entropy that had characterized the post-2014 political cleavages. Similarly in Iraq, the opportunities for genuine nation-building in the post-Nuri al-Malaki age appear on the verge of being squandered. Defeating ISIS militarily is foregrounded by Western strategists, while the opening for correcting the implosion of Iraqi state structures presented by the anti-ISIS fight is ignored.

171 Hassan Hassan, "What ISIL really wants from the battle for Mosul," *The National*, October 30, 2016, <http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/what-isil-really-wants-from-the-battle-for-mosul>.

172 Scott Peterson, "Reclaiming Mosul: concerns run high about the politics of the 'day after,'" *Christian Science Monitor*, October 28, 2016, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2016/1028/Reclaiming-Mosul-concerns-run-high-about-the-politics-of-the-day-after>.

173 Jason Pack and Rhiannon Smith, "Defeating the Islamic State? Lessons from Libya?" *Hate Speech International*, November 4, 2016, <https://www.hate-speech.org/defeating-the-islamic-state-lessons-from-libya/>.

# IX. Conclusion: What Next for ISIS in Libya? (2017 and beyond)

## ISIS's Future Geographical Options in Libya

ISIS's options for future territorial expansion in Libya are limited in geographical terms, and there do not appear to be comparable replacement headquarters to Sirte easily available. ISIS has clearly moved south into the neglected Fezzan region and is trying to bolster its existing, but largely quiescent, *wilaya* there. This step has brought it into competition with rival jihadist groups that have occupied areas of Libya's southwestern borderlands (sometimes referred to as the Salvador Triangle) for decades. It would also face robust and growing French (and potentially US) counter-terrorism assets located across the border at a base in Niger.<sup>174</sup> Nonetheless, the group could exploit the ongoing conflict between tribal (Awlad Sulayman and its rivals) and ethnic (Tebu, Tuareg, and Arab) groups particularly around Sabha, one of the largest cities in the south. These tensions were at an all-time high in mid-2017, as hostilities between the LNA and the Misratan Third Force stationed around Sabha threatened to escalate local rivalries and conflicts.<sup>175</sup> There are lucrative smuggling networks running through Sabha, which ISIS could exploit, if it is willing or able to overcome these steep challenges.<sup>176</sup>

Within Libya, other options for territorial control are less appealing. In Benghazi, Haftar's LNA has reduced ISIS's ability to move throughout the city and has cut off many of the naval and land supply lines to the jihadist enclaves in the city, thus severely weakening the jihadists' position. In January 2017, LNA forces intercepted a convoy of jihadists, including ISIS fighters, attempting a coordinated breakout from the besieged areas;<sup>177</sup> in March, the LNA officially (and for

the second time) declared it had liberated Ganfuda and was turning its attentions to defeating the jihadist coalition controlling the central areas of Sabri and Souq al-Hout.<sup>178</sup> The group could try to re-establish its cell and training center in and around the western city of Sabratha, capitalizing on its need for a base close to Tunisia for Tunisian foreign fighters. However, given how US airstrikes in early 2016 scattered the growing ISIS cell in the city and provoked a community-wide consolidation against it, the group may find it difficult to re-establish itself in the area.<sup>179</sup> ISIS also previously had a cell in Ajdabiya, but this is currently an unwelcoming space for them, especially as Haftar has largely taken the city and sought to militarize it, attempting to replace the mayor with a military governor and to build a trench around the city.<sup>180</sup>

Finally, ISIS could try to reconstitute itself in Bani Walid, a city 135 km southwest of Misrata. There were reports in September 2016 that many fighters from Sirte had been fleeing there, after the pro-GNA advance began in late April 2016; pro-ISIS graffiti was reportedly spotted there in July. Bani Walid has had a similar history to Sirte, having served as a pro-Qaddafi base from which government forces laid siege to Misrata during the 2011 uprisings. As a result, after the fall of the old regime, the city faced many reprisal attacks, including in October 2012, when militias from Misrata embarked on a deadly, drawn-out shelling campaign in reaction to the death of a Misratan detainee in Bani Walid in September 2012.<sup>181</sup> Local resentment for Misrata could create a permissive environment into which ISIS could re-insert itself. But, Bani Walid is also more tribally homogenous than Sirte, meaning that it could be easier to forge a united anti-ISIS resistance.

174 Emma Farge, "The US Military is Building a \$100 Million Drone Base in Niger," Reuters, September 30, 2016, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/us-military-building-a-100-million-drone-base-in-niger-2016-9>.

175 "Airstrike on LNA as Misratans retakes key Sebha crossroads," *Libya Herald*, January 2, 2017, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/01/02/air-strike-on-lna-as-misratans-retake-key-sebha-crossroads/>.

176 Peter Cole and Fiona Mangan, "Policing Libya: Form and Function Of Policing Since The 2011 Revolution," US Institute of Peace, August 25, 2016, <http://www.usip.org/publications/2016/08/25/policing-libya-form-and-function-of-policing-the-2011-revolution>.

177 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *Other Jihadis*, January 10, 2017, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/other-jihadi-actors/jihadi-fighters-attempt-to-flee-lna-siege-in-benghazi/>.

178 "East Libyan forces claim victory in southwest Benghazi," Al Jazeera English, March 18, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/east-libyan-forces-claim-victory-southwest-banghazi-170318165003959.html>.

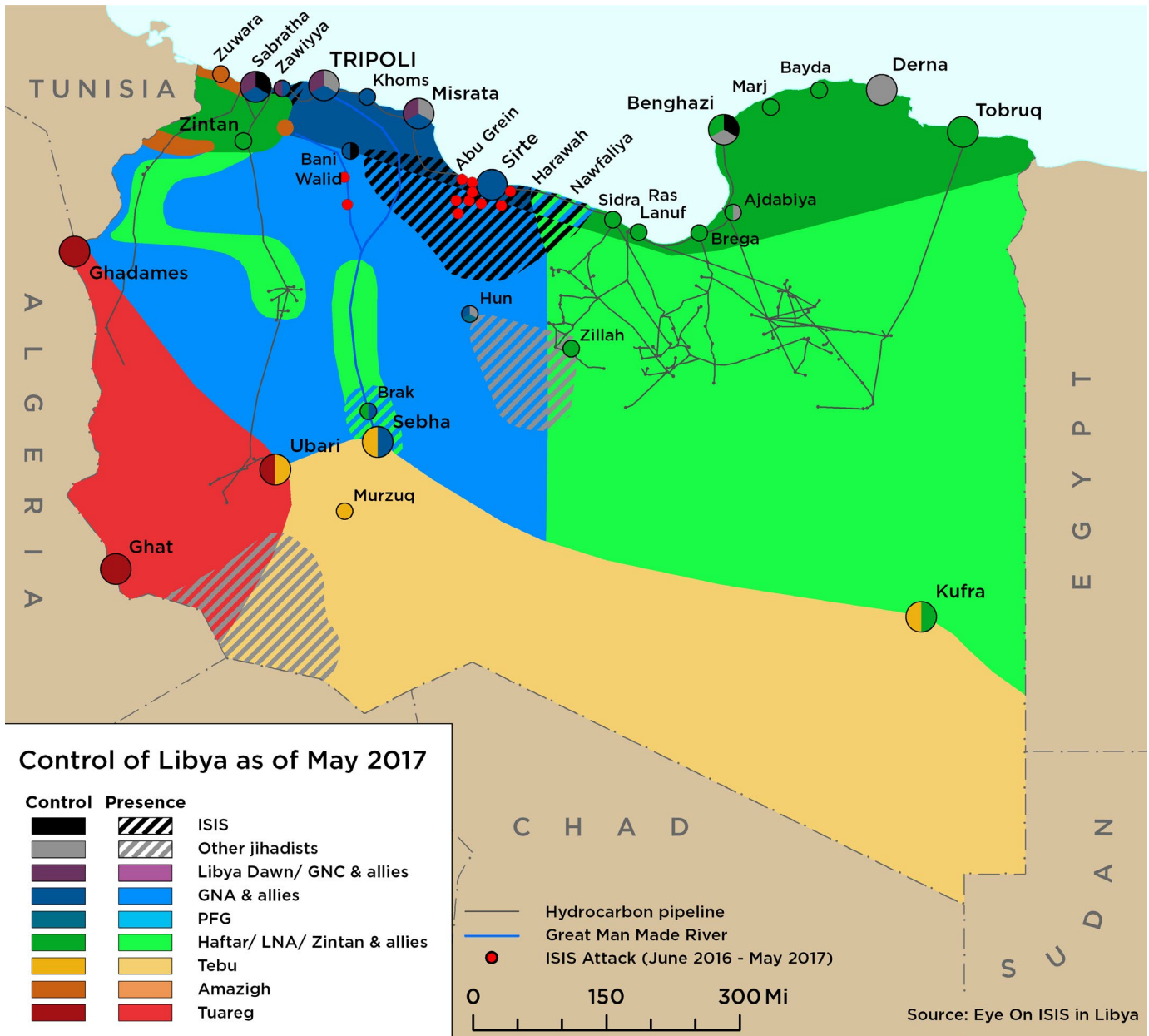
179 Ahmed Elumami and Aidan Lewis, "U.S. Air Strike Hits Islamic State in Libya, 43 Dead," Reuters, February 19, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/libya-security-idUSKCN0V5IA5>.

180 "Haftar Launches Surprise Attack on Eastern Terminals," Menas Associates, September 12, 2016, <https://www.menas.co.uk/blog/haftar-launches-surprise-attack/>.

181 "Libya Clashes in Ex-Qaddafi Bastion Bani Walid," BBC, October 21, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-20022213>.

182 "Libya Clashes in Ex-Qaddafi Bastion Bani Walid," BBC, October 21, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-20022213>.

**Map 3. Map showing control of Libya and ISIS attacks as of May 2017**



Additionally, the Warfalla tribe, which is headquartered in Bani Walid, has not traditionally been attracted to jihadism—quite the opposite. Its disparate population distribution, long-standing alignment with the Qaddafi regime, and its traditional leadership structure have all led to it being staunchly anti-Islamist both in the Qaddafi period and after.<sup>182</sup> Ultimately, Bani Walid is far from the coast, and it would not pose the same symbolic threat to Europe as Sirte did—resettling

there would be seen as a step down for ISIS. It is also further away from the eastern oil terminals and fields, reducing the threat to those vital assets.

### Rebranding, Dispersal, and Sleeper Cells

Securing territorial control elsewhere in Libya is also made more difficult for ISIS by its apparent inability to generate the funds necessary to support state-like governance structures. ISIS's Libyan branch had long stopped expanding prior to the fateful Misratan attacks on its coastal territory in late May 2016, and by June 2016, it appeared the group had begun to hemorrhage

<sup>182</sup> Lacher, Wolfram "The Rise of Tribal Politics," *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qaddafi Future*, ed. Jason Pack, 163-7.

financially.<sup>183</sup> These financial trends were more a result of internal ISIS unsustainability than external counter-terrorism efforts; the perceived riches of Libya—oil and smuggling routes—never materialized for ISIS, and this will likely limit the group’s ability to seize and maintain territorial control elsewhere in the country. While Abu Nabil al-Anbari had declared Libya to be a “well of resources that cannot dry,” the group was never able to make a single dinar from selling pirated oil (ISIS sought only to damage infrastructure in order to deny its wealth to a potential unity government).<sup>184</sup> Nor was the group able to profit from taxing the local population.

Although ISIS is on the defensive tactically and strategically—lacking a reliable substitute for its headquarters in Sirte—the group will continue to exist in Libya in one form or another. Given the geographical considerations and the less permissive environment for ISIS (in comparison to late 2014 and 2015), it appears ISIS is adopting a strategy of dispersal and possible rebranding, forming sleeper cells in Tripoli, Benghazi, and southern Libya. In this way, the group is returning to the tactics of the jihadist groups from which it emerged. Although there is little concrete information concerning ISIS commanders’ post-Sirte strategy, our study of ISIS fighters’ social media postings reveals that they are uniquely committed as jihadists and not necessarily solely as ISIS partisans.<sup>185</sup> This suggests that they could join other jihadist groups, particularly as, for ISIS’s Libyan adherents, the anti-Haftar message has always been a primary selling point. This shared narrative will make it easy for those individuals and whole cells to join the Benghazi and other revolutionary *shura* councils.

As ISIS is on the back foot both in the Levant and North Africa, the incentives for conducting both “shock and awe” attacks in the West and guerilla pinpoint attacks in Libya are likely to grow as a way to maintain momentum and drive recruitment. This has been highlighted most recently by the Manchester bombing on May 22, 2017, which was claimed by ISIS and carried out by Salman Abedi, a British Libyan with connections to jihadist networks in Libya. Abedi visited Tripoli just days before the attack and may have benefitted from support and training from jihadist networks in Libya.

183 Roslington and Pack, “Who Pays for ISIS in Libya?”

184 Jon Donnison, “Sirte and Misrata: A tale of two war-torn Libyan cities,” BBC, December 20, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16257289>.

185 Eye on ISIS team’s study of Libyan jihadists’ social media postings, some of which are available at <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-materials/>.

## Preventing ISIS’s Resurgence

Given the above scenarios, the temptation to declare Libya ISIS-free should be strongly resisted. ISIS’s existence in Libya is a symptom of the much more extensive disease that has stricken Libya since the 2011 uprisings. Without combating the causes of the disease—weak governance, poor security provision, ongoing political crisis, economic stagnation, lack of rule of law, domination of militias, and limited international support for local Libyan capacity—defeating ISIS in Sirte is like sweeping dirt from a room without a dustpan: you merely push the problem to other places instead of eliminating it for good.

ISIS and its jihadist allies have made a specific policy of seeking to undermine any moves to strengthen central government in Libya, including by trying to undermine oil production. The longer it takes to restore reliable oil production at higher levels, the longer it will be before any Libyan government will even have the potential to extend control over broader swathes of Libya. The ongoing political crisis, which at the time of writing does not appear likely to resolve in the medium term, prevents any unified, whole-of-government response to ISIS’s successor groups; it also stymies any coherent and coordinated devolution of counter-terrorism responsibilities and support to the local level. While confronting their most daunting opponents—Misratan militias supported by the West and Haftar’s forces in Benghazi—ISIS fighters have been able to launch successful retaliatory attacks when cornered and under siege. In less well-defended areas such as the south of Libya, however, ISIS and its allies likely have the military capabilities to resist any likely opposition; this capacity has possibly even grown since al-Baghdadi’s call in November 2016 for fighters to fall back to Libya in the face of pressure in Mosul and Raqqa.

As long as all Libyan militias continue to be unaccountable and resist incorporation into official institutions, ISIS will benefit from the ensuing instability. Finally, the recent oil production revival, which followed the lifting of force majeure—unforeseeable circumstances that exempt the contracting party from fulfilling their contractual obligations—on eastern ports in September 2016 and the lifting of blockades on pipelines in southwestern Libya in early 2017, is not necessarily sustainable. This is due to security threats, serious damage to facilities, and the ongoing politicization of Libyan oil—and because poor public financial management leaves any assets vulnerable to misuse.<sup>186</sup> Indeed, Libya is unlikely to recover

186 Jason Pack and Rhiannon Smith, “Haftar’s takeover of oil crescent could be nail in GNA’s coffin,” *Middle East Eye*, September 14, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/>

economically to the point where the country will be able to prevent radicalization through economic incentive schemes or genuine capacity building in the medium term. Therefore, ISIS and other jihadists will continue to be able to exploit Libya as an area where they can operate, heal, and possibly regroup.

### **International Focus on Libya Must Not Fade**

Importantly, there is also a risk that international focus on Libya will fade now that victory has been declared over ISIS in Sirte. This could even lead to the collapse of the GNA, which relies on an increasingly narrow local support base of non-jihadist Misratan and Tripoli militias propped up by Western support. Their position became more precarious following the pseudo-coup of October 2016, when some previously supportive Islamist and jihadist militias abandoned the GNA for the reinstated National Salvation government of Khalifa al-Ghwell.<sup>187</sup> However, as of late May, the GNA and its allied militias had regained the upper hand, driving their rivals out of key positions in the capital. Recent peace talks brokered by Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia, among others, resulted in the Libya Dialogue group agreeing—in principle—on six key amendments to the LPA (that it was hoped would be acceptable for both Haftar and the PC) and led to a symbolic meeting between Serraj and Haftar in the UAE in early May 2017. However, this meeting provoked a backlash, and the subsequent escalation between the LNA and GNA-aligned forces in the Oil Crescent and southwestern Libya may have derailed these efforts, at least temporarily.<sup>188</sup> In this environment, a dangerous vacuum of Western engagement in Libya has arisen. Britain is preoccupied with Brexit; as of late May, the Trump administration has yet to appoint the relevant personnel at the State Department and elsewhere tasked with the Libya file; while France and Germany are bogged down with general elections in 2017.

From 2015 until the start of 2017, the international community paid more attention to Libya because the two greatest perceived threats to European domestic stability—ISIS and the migrant crisis—emanate partly

from Libyan shores. If the West feels like it has done what it needs to do to cope with these two threats through US airstrikes and the European Union Naval Force in the Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR Med), it may shift its priorities away from Libya before helping the country address the root causes of these crises. This will be a tempting position to take, particularly because these efforts have required a relatively limited commitment from the West as opposed to expensive, long-term assistance required to tackle the root causes. Alternatively, growing public concern in the wake of the Manchester attack may provoke Western powers to resort to high impact, counter-terror operations in an attempt to contain the threat. However, any international approach that frames Libya in purely military, counter-terror terms is doomed to fail; airstrikes and targeted killings will give way to a vacuum of political authority in which jihadists thrive.

“However, any international approach that frames Libya in purely military, counter-terror terms is doomed to fail.”

Libya is a sensitive political issue in many Western capitals, especially the UK and United States, where there remains controversy surrounding the decision to support the rebels in 2011. This sensitivity translates into a desire to ignore Libya, made all the more tempting when Libya is viewed in a global context competing with other pressing interests in Syria, Iran, China, and Russia, among others. Moreover, given the anti-nation-building and anti-intervention sensitivities that were stirred up by the 2016 US presidential election and the sustained media narrative about US culpability in Libya’s post-conflict implosion, the temptation for the current administration to drop Libya like a hot potato would be almost inevitable, especially as it seeks to distance itself from the perceived mistakes of previous administrations. Additionally, Libya is frequently seen in US policy circles as a more proximate concern for European allies; the current administration’s frequent pronouncements about incentivizing US allies to bear more of the financial and military burden for their own defense could lead to US disengagement in Libya out of the hope that the Europeans will pick up the slack. Therefore, as we write, the US position toward Libya truly hangs in the balance. Yet, it is only the United States that has the political capital, the diplomatic

---

columns/haftar-s-takeover-oil-crescent-could-be-nail-gna-s-coffin-1013075476.

187 Jason Pack, “Attempted ‘Coup’ in Tripoli,” *Libya Analysis*, October 17, 2016, <http://www.libya-analysis.com/attempted-coup-in-tripoli/>; Jason Pack and Rhiannon Smith, “Coup Attempt Could Complicate Libya’s Fight Against ISIS,” *The Tony Blair Faith Foundation*, October 24, 2016, <http://www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/coup-attempt-could-complicate-libyas-fight-against-isis>.

188 Eye on ISIS in Libya, *The Anti-ISIS Coalition*, January 31, 2017, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/the-anti-isis-coalition/libya-political-dialogue-agrees-amendments-to-lpa/>.



connections, and economic muscle to truly lead mediation and reconstruction efforts in Libya.

### ISIS is Down but Not Out

In this context, it will be important for the current administration to see what ISIS decides for its own future in the coming months before formulating a policy. ISIS throughout the world is having an identity crisis after defeats and setbacks on all major fronts. The organization likely will face a broad rebranding and restructuring, and many of its affiliates are likely to disappear. However, its *wilayat* in Libya could survive in some state of quiescence as a collection of sleeper cells.<sup>189</sup> Libyan ISIS fighters make up a significant percentage of the fighters who have seen battle in Iraq and Syria, and this could continue to tie them closer to the group's key leaders in the Levant, despite the fall of Sirte or even Mosul. These connections could mean that Libyan *wilayat* may be prioritized in the future to receive financial support, especially if the West takes its eye off the ball. It could also mean that ISIS's spiritual leaders might move to Libya if pushed out of Iraq and Syria, thereby strengthening ISIS's Libyan *wilayat* appeal for prospective recruits as the top place to make jihadist *hijra*—the obligation to migrate to lands under Muslim rule (in this case, it is conceivable that the ISIS presence in Libya could outlast the original presences in Iraq and Syria). If Haftar and his supporters gain the upper hand throughout a broader swathe of Libya, repression against Islamist groups could drive more young people to ISIS. And if the oil sector continues to improve, it could lure back certain risk-tolerant Western investors to Libya—attractive targets for lucrative and high-profile kidnappings. If international attention turns away from Libya, or if the GNA implodes or fails to unify more completely, ISIS could also regroup.

Hence, there is only a small chance that the events of mid- to late-2016 sealed the fate of ISIS in Libya and that the group therefore would not pose a significant threat in the future. ISIS will continue to face competition from other jihadist actors and non-jihadist militias, which could be more difficult for it to confront given recent setbacks; however, this is the best—and least likely—scenario. The more likely scenario is that ISIS will continue to exist in one form or another for the foreseeable future, and thus must be combated through a dedicated international focus on forging a political and economic solution for Libya.

<sup>189</sup> Clint Watts, "When the Caliphate Crumbles: The Future of Islamic State's Affiliates," *War on the Rocks*, June 13, 2016, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/06/when-the-caliphate-crumbles-the-future-of-the-islamic-states-affiliates/>.

### Manchester Arena Attack and Libya's Current Place in Global Jihadist Networks

The investigation into the background of British-born Libyan suicide bomber, Salman Abedi, who attacked an arena in Manchester in May 2017, is ongoing as this report goes to press. The question of whether Abedi was acting alone or affiliated with a larger scheme likely holds the key to unlocking his motivations and the geostrategic significance of his act.

Salman Abedi's parents fled to the UK in the 1990s after his father, Ramadan Abedi, was accused of membership in the anti-Qaddafi and al-Qaeda aligned LIFG, a claim buttressed by former Libyan security officer Abdel Basit Haroum and Ramadan's reported close friendship with prominent LIFG leader Sami al-Saadi.<sup>190</sup> The Abedis, like many other LIFG and Muslim Brotherhood members, fled to northern England as refugees, settling in a close-knit Libyan community south of Manchester.<sup>191</sup> While Salman Abedi's father and most of the family returned to Tripoli following the 2011 uprisings, Salman and his brothers, Hashem and Ismail, remained in Manchester ostensibly to finish university.

Abedi's radicalization and his execution of the attack were likely facilitated by others in his community and in Libya, even if he did not completely confide his intentions to his companions. The southern Manchester area where he resided has produced known ISIS operatives and recruiters.<sup>192</sup> In particular, security sources are investigating Abedi's relationship with two ISIS recruiters, Amir Khalil Raoufi and Raphael Hostay, who were both killed in Syria in the past three years and hailed from the same neighborhood. German intelligence revealed that Abedi passed through known hot-spots of extremism, Dusseldorf and Frankfurt, twice since 2014 and may have traveled to Syria where it is alleged he received paramilitary training.<sup>193</sup>

<sup>190</sup> Martin Evans et al, "Everything we know about Manchester suicide bomber Salman Abedi," *Telegraph*, May 26, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/05/24/everything-know-salman-abedi-named-manchester-suicide-bomber/>.

<sup>191</sup> "Salam Abedi: Student dropout turned suicide bomber," *Economic Times*, May 24, 2017, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/salman-abedi-student-dropout-turned-suicide-bomber/printarticle/58818241.cms>.

<sup>192</sup> Dominic Casciani, "Manchester attack: the Libya-jihad connection," BBC, May 24, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-manchester-40037830>.

<sup>193</sup> Lizzie Dearden, "Salman Abedi travelled through Turkey and Germany four days before launching Manchester suicide attack," *Independent*, May 25, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/manchester-bomber-salman-abedi-germany-turkey-four-days-suicide-attack-istanbul-dusseldorf-police-a7754836.html>.

Proof of Abedi's ties to an international ISIS network entrenched within Libya and the UK, and with a history of connections to Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, demonstrates the main contentions of this paper; namely that ISIS emerged from the seeds planted by previous waves of jihadist movements. ISIS is not a new phenomenon; it merely reconnects existing jihadist networks in a new way. Despite recent

military setbacks for ISIS in the Levant and in Sirte, the movement is still able to fall back upon its base—preexisting jihadist networks.<sup>194</sup>

---

<sup>194</sup> Alia Brahimi, "Why Libya is still a global terror threat," *Guardian*, May 25, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/25/libya-global-terror-threat-manchester-attack-gaddafi>.

# X. Recommendations: A Purely Counter-Terror Approach to ISIS in Libya is Insufficient

## **Targeted Capacity-building Programs to Fill Power Vacuum Exploited by ISIS**

ISIS is a symptom of Libya's underlying disease: lack of governance. The country does not require nation-building assistance writ large, nor does it need injections of development aid. Treating the cause of Libya's instability, and not just its symptoms, requires targeted capacity-building programs that empower Libyan actors to fill the vacuums that have allowed for jihadist expansion. In its assistance efforts, Western actors, including the United States, should be wary and mitigate the risks of becoming embroiled in the complex environment.

If the United States continues to prioritize countering ISIS globally and containing the migrant crisis, it will need to focus on Libya more than it has in the past. Foreign assistance budgets are expected to tighten under the Trump administration; however, while prioritizing Libya's jihadist threat will require more funding, the challenge for the US government will be deciding shrewdly where to allocate scarce resources for maximum impact. In the current foreign assistance climate, the United States will likely only be spending money in Libya on projects that are perceived as having a direct bearing on US national security interests. To date, these have been viewed in counter-terror terms. We counsel that the current view of US national interests be expanded to include governance, especially at the local level, in Libya.

Jihadist organizations have been able to survive and thrive in Libya because they offer governance functions to a population that is starved for them. Even if ISIS fades as a phenomenon, other jihadist groups will persist and will likely continue to control pockets of territory as the Benghazi and Derna Revolutionary Shura Councils currently do, even as they come under increasing pressure from Haftar's forces in early 2017.

ISIS provided more extensive governance than any of its jihadist competitors in Libya. It was uniquely brutal because it was not really run by Libyans and was oblivious to their social and cultural sensitivities. This was more responsible for its demise than any anti-ISIS military offensives, airstrikes, or special operations. As ISIS's direct territorial threat fades, policy makers

must ask how a new framework of decentralized Libyan governance can be encouraged to prevent ISIS, and similar groups, from reemerging. Only a national governance solution that takes into account local Libyan particularities can diffuse the appeal of jihadist groups, while building Libyan political, social, and military mechanisms to contain them.

Throughout 2015 and early 2016, ISIS failed to establish itself as a significant player outside of Sirte and its environs. It was only a brief interloper in Derna and Sabratha. Although ISIS successfully played the role of spoiler throughout Libya, it was never the sole, most deeply-rooted, or even most militarily powerful jihadist group in Libya. It follows that international efforts to return Libya to peace and prosperity should not focus on ISIS exclusively or be curtailed in ISIS's wake. Instead, foreign governments should seek to help Libyan-led efforts to eradicate the existence of a permissive environment for jihadist recruitment, training, and territorial control. This can only be achieved by ameliorating the causes of conflict between Libya's mainstream groups and not by supporting one faction over another. It is critical that Libyans recognize that these mainstream groups include members of tribes and residents of cities perceived as loyal to Qaddafi. Any solution—such as the 2013 Political Isolation Law—that institutionalizes these groups as second class citizens will be perennially unstable.

## **Decentralization and Power Sharing Can Tackle Zero-Sum Mentality & Contribute to Stabilization**

Decentralization and power sharing can tackle Libya's "winner-takes-all" mentality and contribute to the nation's stabilization by empowering Libyans at the local level to take their destiny into their own hands. Libyan municipality-based organizations, whether they are local councils, business elites, or militias have consistently outperformed national entities and should be seen as "successes to build on" rather than "obstacles to be overcome."<sup>195</sup>

<sup>195</sup> Jason Pack and Mohamed Eljarh, "Localizing Power in Libya," Atlantic Council, November 26, 2013, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/articles/localizing-power-in-libya>.

To prevent ISIS's resurgence, the international community must focus on combating the political, security, and governance vacuum in Libya. Recent cleavages between families, tribes, and communities have had a knock-on effect on existing competitions between localities over scarce assets like natural resources and political power. Different Libyan factions and individuals assume the other will adopt a winner-takes-all approach to power should they prevail. So, individual Libyans coalesce into interest groups, usually along municipal/tribal lines, in an effort to magnify their strength and maximize their chance of being part of a winning coalition. Although the alliance system among Libya's main blocs has shifted repeatedly since 2014, the result has been mostly bloody stalemate. ISIS and other jihadist actors ostensibly offer to transcend petty squabbles, forging a unity rooted in Islam, but the group is really just another faction seeking to take all and capitalize on the fragmentation of Libya's political framework and social fabric. That ISIS's brutality has undercut its effectiveness—as demonstrated in this report—does not diminish the challenge of the zero-sum mentality that permeates Libyan militias.

In a rentier state<sup>196</sup> with a welfare and subsidy-based social contract such as Libya, the key central government responsibility is spending and distributing oil money. Devising a way to equitably distribute money to local councils is likely much easier than trying to create a truly unifying central government out of myriad warring factions that view each other as potential future oppressors. Empowering local government through decentralization could also help integrate vulnerable communities (e.g., Tebu, Tuareg, Amazigh, and marginalized tribes like the Qadhadhfa and Megarha) more closely into Libyan society, building a new national identity while providing these groups with the means to resist jihadist groups like ISIS. Ultimately, this is the only sustainable way to defeat ISIS and the other jihadist groups from which it derives and into which its remnants will likely flow. At present, years of Qaddafi's sham local empowerment through the *Jamahiriyyan* system of "Basic People's Congresses"—a congress consisting of every adult man and women in the local municipality—and similar initiatives, have sapped the public spiritedness otherwise inherent in Libyan society. A cultural shift galvanized by local leaders is needed.

Decentralized governance in Libya may not look how foreigners expect it to look. No country can provide an existing model for Libya. Neighboring countries

with similar tribal or resource wealth dynamics present few compelling examples of long-term good governance; other models fail to address Libya's unique circumstances. Rather than try to fit Libya into an existing model, Libya's international allies would do better to encourage Libya to develop its own solutions building on the strength of its robust local community structures. These structures have, after all, largely prevented the country's total collapse in the midst of anarchy. For many Libyan municipalities, local leadership consists of some combination of elected officials, militia commanders, religious leaders, tribal elders, business leaders, and local notables. Foreign governments frequently blanch at working with such groups, fearing it undermines their efforts to build up official institutions. However, these groups are often considered legitimate by their communities.

“That ISIS's brutality has undercut its effectiveness does not diminish the challenge of the zero-sum mentality that permeates Libyan militias.”

No one expects an aged tribal elder to run for office or an important business leader to abandon business for politics. They still expect those individuals to be consulted on local affairs and be actively included in the political leadership of the community. Foreign governments will need to take Libya's lead as to what constitutes legitimate leadership and be flexible in working with whomever locals put forward as their interlocutors. These interlocutors will likely vary significantly among the many cities, towns, and desert areas around the country. Some cities will present all elected officials while others will put forward religious leaders and tribal elders along with their elected officials. If the municipalities can peacefully agree on their local leadership, foreigners should accept their choices and confine their role to helping construct a framework in which local leaders can work together to share power at the national level. It is necessary that this process of strengthening municipalities and local governance is accompanied by a plan to establish strong national institutions such as a national parliament and national ministries. This bottom-up model is likely the best approach to enable the creation of efficacious central institutions capable of devolving appropriate amounts of power to the local level.

<sup>196</sup> A rentier state is a state which derives most of its national revenues from "renting" its indigenous resources (oil in Libya's case) to external clients.

Although not based on kinship or regional ties, jihadists insert themselves into the ongoing conflicts that are inherent to local/tribal realities. They have also established a pattern of spoiling the emergence of any coherent governance at both the local and national levels. Until Libyans can negotiate an agreement amongst themselves that changes the winner-takes-all dynamic of the conflict, it is almost certain that they will continue to face a terrorist threat from rebranded ISIS fighters as well as other jihadist actors.

### **Continuation of Limited Special Forces Deployments**

Train and equip missions are unlikely to succeed as long as governance weaknesses persist. Given this situation, we recommend the continuation of limited western special forces deployments working alongside Libyan allies and the avoidance of unilateral, long-term train and equip programs until a true unity government emerges.

While massive train and equip missions may not work, Western powers cannot sit on their hands if ISIS re-emerges or takes on a new form elsewhere in Libya. Hence, we suggest targeted special operations forces involvement and the skill transfer that this involves. The continued commitment of Western special operations forces is superior to immediately arming and training Libyan forces.<sup>197</sup> The rapid injection of significant resources into Libyan armed groups, if and when peace takes hold, would risk creating new competition for foreign military resources and exacerbating pre-existing power dynamics between militias from different tribes, cities, or religious orientations. Until there is a true unity government in place that is acknowledged as legitimate by the country's main regional blocs, it is not wise to undertake a massive train and equip program that seeks to integrate militias into formal security institutions.

The negative consequences of engaging in such programs prematurely have been felt in Libya and abroad; training programs suffered from half-hearted commitment, a selection process that favored recruits from certain Libyan militia factions, and lack of discipline among recruits.<sup>198</sup> Still, close military

counter-terrorism cooperation with NATO powers will be required to keep the jihadist threat at bay as national and local governments establish themselves. The small numbers of US and British special forces deployed to Misrata to support pro-GNA forces during the Sirte offensive seem to have been critical to the breakthroughs made. Similarly, French special forces deployed with the LNA were instrumental to their successes in Benghazi. The deployment of fewer than four hundred Western personnel to liaise with pro-GNA militias during their fight against ISIS drastically improved their capacities for reconnaissance, battle planning, surveillance, and mopping-up operations.<sup>199</sup>

Given these dynamics, it is better to commit limited Western forces in the short term to engage in the mentoring of loyal forces, while the Libyans take a structured approach to building up their own military and security sector in a way that does not upset the existing balance of power. The provision of this assistance and the success Libyan forces experience as a result, for example after the Sirte offensive in 2016, could be used as an incentive for reluctant militias to rally behind a unity government. These forces could remain embedded within the European Union Border Assistance Mission in Libya to focus on counter-terror operations at borders with Tunisia and Algeria, or inside friendly Libyan militias (as it is claimed they were doing during the anti-ISIS campaign in Sirte).

The international community, especially NATO, could take a lead role providing the technical assistance Libyan authorities need to build these new defense institutions.<sup>200</sup> Simultaneously, the international community should be more transparent in its security assistance to assure Libyans that they are not interfering in local affairs, but helping build capacity in the security sector. Specifically, the international community should insist that professionalization efforts for new groups like the PC's Presidential Guard should be transparent to avoid confusion over legitimacy or allegiance, as occurred in October 2016, when the rump GNC in Tripoli established its own so-called Presidential Guard.

197 We do not believe that Russian, Egyptian, or Gulf Special Forces deployments have a stabilizing effect on Libya. Their rules of engagement and political objectives tend to favor one Libyan political faction over the others rather than working with anti-jihadist militias to build capacity and assiduously not choosing a side in the political conflict as has largely been the practice of American and British Special Forces.

198 Lindsey Hilsum, "Thursday night was riot night at Basingbourn base," Channel 4 News, November 6, 2014, <http://www.channel4.com/news/libyan-troops-riot-basingbourn-barracks-uk-army-training-lindsey-hilsum>.

199 First author discussions with top NATO and UK officials; International Crisis Group, "The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset," Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report, No. 170, November 4, 2016, 22; The exact number of Western special forces is not publicly known. The ICG report concurs with the primary author's conversations that French special forces were the most involved in on the ground fighting and proved instrumental in Haftar's gains against the BRSC in Benghazi.

200 "NATO ready to help Libya build defence institutions if asked - deputy NATO chief," Reuters, April 16, 2016, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-nato-libya-idUKKCN0XDOPY>.

The Libyan national government will be better off negotiating a unitary and comprehensive army and police training program instead of fielding a raft of training offers from different countries. The last thing Libya needs is individual army and police units trained by different countries to different operational standards. Libya should negotiate and pay for its own training unless it cannot afford it. Even then, it should negotiate deals that meet its needs rather than choose among whatever is offered for free. Foreign governments should only help pay if Libya truly cannot.

### **Address Social Fissures That Create Governance Vacuums**

In concert with decentralization, Libyans should take other steps to address social fissures that create governance vacuums. The provision of foreign assistance to support the establishment of transitional justice processes, if requested, could help reconcile differences and rebuild trust between conflicting parties.<sup>201</sup>

Any grand bargain culminating in a true unity government should involve a Truth and Reconciliation initiative. Such an initiative is long overdue and could diffuse the tensions between pro- and anti-lustration factions within Libya.<sup>202</sup> Some groups in Libya believe they “own” the revolution because they paid for it in blood—and were on the winning side. They see a “fair” division of power and money as one that favors them and their cities. The corrosive effects of this approach to governance have been seen from Algeria to Zimbabwe and guarantee ongoing tension and instability. Cities such as Sirte and Bani Walid, which have been perceived as pro-Qaddafi, must be accorded the same rights to self-governance and their share by population of the oil revenue as every other city and population. Libyans may be able to manage this themselves through traditional dispute settlement mechanisms, but if they request foreign assistance with transitional justice it should be provided. It should not be forced on them as a precondition for other assistance however.

Within the framework of a coherent and well-planned devolution process, local governments should be explicitly empowered to take all responsibilities not

specifically assigned to the central government. Confusion about roles and responsibilities in Libya has contributed to disorder. Simply assigning specific roles to the national government and empowering local governments with authority over everything else should minimize this confusion and excuse for inaction. More detailed roles and responsibilities will evolve over time, but to begin with, local officials should be responsible for most government functions.

“Within the framework of a coherent and well-planned devolution process, local governments should be explicitly empowered to take all responsibilities not specifically assigned to the central government.”

The PC should nominate a widely known and respected Libyan leader to take over the Ministry of Local Governance (which should under no circumstances be eliminated in a smaller cabinet). That person, and his or her staff, should be encouraged to work closely with the Central Bank of Libya and the HoR to release necessary funds to local governments on a consistent basis. The minister of local governance should also go on a highly publicized listening tour across Libya to develop trust, stronger relationships with municipal leaders, and knowledge of local needs.

### **Support for Bureaucratic and Fiduciary Competencies, Media Training, and Parliamentarians**

If Libyans can agree to decentralized governance as a means of ending conflict over oil revenue, foreign powers should be prepared to offer focused support immediately to help implementation. This should include independent advisors to support basic bureaucratic competencies and fiduciary duties, reinvigorating assistance pledges, especially to neglected areas, media training, and providing capacity building for parliamentarians.

Basic bureaucratic competencies are usually absent in Libyan government entities. The first step in international best practices for government procurement, for example, is generally to write a

201 Rhiannon Smith, “Non Military Perspectives on Recent Developments in Libya,” *OPEN Publications*, Vol. 1, No. 7, (2017), [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/b3eb9d\\_f3ccb872c7bd41f2a5e58dab86f5fa5d.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/b3eb9d_f3ccb872c7bd41f2a5e58dab86f5fa5d.pdf).

202 Jason Pack and Sami Zaptia, “Libya Needs a Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” *Guardian*, October 13, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/oct/13/libya-truth-and-reconciliation-commission>.

request for proposal (RFP). Outside of the National Oil Company and the Libyan Investment Authority, essentially no Libyan government entities follow the procedure of writing RFPs. Basic budgeting and strategic planning are also lacking. Foreign governments should pay for independent private companies to work with each municipality to write RFPs and to hire private sector accountants to help them with basic bureaucratic competencies. The municipalities need to have advisers whose fiduciary duty is focused exclusively on providing basic governance functions to their constituents, rather than the current practice of employing development consultants with a wide remit who tend to favor civil society development over administrative capacity building. Not only would Libyans not trust foreign government advisers, but foreign development agencies often have other loyalties and priorities.

The UN should renew and strengthen its focus on harnessing the many different assistance pledges to Libya, especially to Sirte, ensuring that they are complementary and not contradictory; that they are requested by Libyans; and that they cover all areas of need. If areas of need in Sirte and other areas vulnerable to jihadists are not covered, the UN should publicly identify them and lobby international partners to assist.

The international community should revive media training—such as that offered by the BBC Media Action team—especially for major local news outlets, to encourage more neutrality, and possibly even support the creation of a new, overarching news network to be funded through existing Libyan funds. In particular, it would be important to establish a training program, if not a complete curriculum, on investigative journalism. The importance of the media as a watchdog for transparency and honest practices in government is essential, and it is based on the capacity of journalists to research and investigate the activities of political actors and institutions.

Another area where international actors can help is in strengthening the preparation and capacities of parliamentarians and parliamentary groups. This could be done through ad hoc training programs but also through exchanges between parliamentary institutions of various countries. For example, Libyan delegations of parliamentarians could be invited to spend time experiencing the working of partner institutions in Western democracies. The same action

could be taken regarding municipalities. A program could be established in which a municipality in a Western country “adopts” a municipality in Libya, as in a sister city arrangement, and engages in a series of exchanges of personnel, so as to improve the bureaucratic efficiency and the functioning of Libya’s governing structure.

### **Some Resources Should Be Focused on Economic Reconstruction**

To confront the root causes of ISIS’s rise in Libya, the international community in general, and the US in particular, should focus resources on economic reconstruction to confront black and gray markets and expand the job market for youth. This could be achieved through incentivizing the elimination of fuel subsidies, supporting a modern commercial code, and funding scholarship and vocational programs locally or abroad.

Black markets (like those which export subsidized gasoline to Tunisia and other neighboring countries where local prices are much higher) spur large-scale organized crime and can fund actors like ISIS, in addition to costing the Libyan treasury huge sums. For this reason, the elimination of fuel subsidies is not just an economic issue. This is a pressing domestic policy challenge, which is serious enough that foreign governments should incentivize the national government to eliminate fuel subsidies immediately. It is best done while oil prices are low and the Libyan public is aware that the national finances are near collapse. Waiting until things are more stable makes the ability to obtain public buy-in much less likely.

Open markets are critical to Libyan economic development. The Libyan Bar Association is already preparing to offer guidance on creating a modern commercial code when stable governance emerges. Foreign governments can help by opening their markets to Libyan products. It will likely take some time for Libyan companies to seek out and implement guidance on how to meet European Union (EU) and other technical standards, but Libyan business leaders are very capable of doing so, given enough time. They should be incentivized to meet these standards by low tariffs on potential Libyan exports like dates, olive oil, canned tuna fish, tomatoes, light manufactured goods, aluminum, steel, glass, and whatever else Libyan entrepreneurs may start producing.

# Authors

**Mr. Jason Pack** is the Founder and Emeritus Director of Eye on ISIS in Libya. He currently serves as Executive Director of the US-Libya Business Association (USLBA). He is also the founder of the consultancy Libya-Analysis. In this capacity, he is the North Africa Analyst at Risk Intelligence, a Danish company specializing in maritime risk and long-range assessment. Over the last eight years, Jason has worked to promote US-Libyan commercial, academic, and governmental ties. After helping Western businesses operate in Tripoli in 2008, he served as USLBA Program Manager from 2009-10. He then completed a master's degree in global and imperial history at St. Antony's College, Oxford in 2011. Since then, he has been affiliated with the University of Cambridge, where he was a PhD student and researcher of Middle Eastern history. His work has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Spectator*, *Newsweek*, the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian*, *Foreign Policy*, and *Foreign Affairs*. He is also a frequent commentator on the BBC, France 24, CNN, VOA, and Al Jazeera.

**Ms. Rhiannon Smith** is Managing Director at Eye On ISIS in Libya and Managing Director of Libya-Analysis, a consultancy organization specializing in producing bespoke reports on Libya for Western companies and governments. She is the North Africa Editor for Norwegian think tank Hate Speech International and the author of a NATO report looking at non-military perspectives on Libya. Previously, Rhiannon was the Program Manager for the Middle East at the University of Cambridge Judge Business School (CJBS). As part of this role she managed the Middle East Research Centre at CJBS, focusing on the particular leadership and management challenges facing Middle Eastern organizations. She lived in Tripoli, Libya from September 2010 to February 2011, then October 2011 through to January 2014, working for a number of organizations including Libyan research consultancy Know Libya and international NGO No Peace Without Justice. She has written opinion and commentary articles on Libya for numerous media outlets including Al-Jazeera, Open Democracy, the New Statesman, and Middle East Eye, among others. Rhiannon holds an MSc in Development Management from the Open University and a BA Hons in Arabic, with French and Persian from the University of Exeter. She speaks, writes and reads Arabic and French.

**Dr. Karim Mezran** is a senior fellow with the Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East. Mezran joined the Hariri Center as a senior fellow focusing on the processes of change in North Africa. As a distinguished Libyan-Italian scholar, Mezran brings enormous depth of understanding to the transition in Libya and elsewhere in the region. In addition, Mezran is an adjunct professor of Middle East studies at the Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). Mezran was previously the director of the Center for American Studies in Rome. His analyses on the Middle East and North Africa have been widely published in Italian- and other-language journals and publications. Mezran holds a PhD in international relations from SAIS; a JD in comparative law from the University of Rome (La Sapienza); an LLM in comparative law from the George Washington University; an MA in Arab studies from Georgetown University; and a BA in management from Hiram College. His recent publications include "Libya: Negotiations for Transition" in *Arab Spring: Negotiating in the Shadow of the Intifadat*; "Libya" in *Political and Constitutional Transitions in North Africa: Actors and Factors*; and "Libya in Transition: from Jamahiriya to Jumhuriyyah?" in *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World*.



# Appendix A: Key Groups and People

Abbr.	Name of group or individual	Description
<b>166</b>	166 Brigade	A powerful militia from Misrata that fought with Libya Dawn. In mid-2015 tried to drive ISIS out of Sirte but failed.
	Abdel Fatteh Younis	He was Qaddafi's Interior minister and a senior military officer. He defected in the early days of the 2011 uprisings and was appointed as the NTC's commander-in-chief. He was killed on July 28, 2011. His killing led to the fracturing of the Islamist and non-Islamist wings of the anti-Qaddafi resistance and a unified military command has never existed since.
	Abdelkader al-Najdi	A Saudi national who served as emir in charge of administrating ISIS's Libyan wilayat.
	Abdul Hakim Belhadj	A Libyan "Afghan Arab" who was imprisoned by the Qaddafi regime for many years. He led the Umar al-Mukhtar brigade during the 2011 uprisings and later headed the Tripoli Military Council.
	Abdul-Raziq al-Nazhuri	Field Marshall Haftar's chief of staff, number two in the LNA, and military governor of much of Eastern Libya.
	Abdurrahman Swehli	A Misratan politician who is the president of the High Council of State and grandson of the famous anti-Italian civic leader Ramadan al-Swehli.
	Abu Abdullah al-Libi	The spiritual leader of Ansar al-Sharia who swore allegiance to ISIS in March 2015.
	Abu Ali al-Anbari (aka Abu Ala al-Afri)	Al-Baghdadi's second-in-command and governor of ISIS territories in Syria.
	Abu Amr al-Jazrawi	A Saudi national and ISIS commander with close ties to al-Baghdadi. He held many roles of responsibility within Sirte.
	Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi	The notorious leader of core ISIS.
	Abu Musab al-Zarqawi	A Jordanian national who founded al-Qaeda in Iraq, and is credited by some as the founder of ISIS.
<b>ASMB</b>	Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade	An Islamist militia in Derna formed by former LIFG fighters and Islamists detained in the Abu Salim prison under Qaddafi. It is led by Salim Darbi and is part of the DMSC.
	Abu Sufian bin Qumu	A Libyan national who is a former Guantanamo Bay prisoner and became the leader of Derna's Ansar al-Sharia branch.
	Abu Ubaida ibn al-Jarrah Brigade	Islamist militia accused of killing Abdel Fatteh Younis.
	Agilah Saleh	President of the House of Representatives.
<b>ARSC</b>	Ajdabiya Revolutionaries' Shura Council	A coalition of Islamist and jihadist militias in Ajdabiya formed to oppose Haftar and the LNA.

<b>BB</b>	Al-Battar Brigade	A Libyan militia created in Syria by fighters from Derna. It eventually pledged allegiance to ISIS and continues to fight in both Iraq and Syria.
<b>BM</b>	Al-Bunyan al-Marsus	A GNA-aligned force comprising mainly Misratan fighters and led the ground offensive against ISIS in Sirte in 2016.
<b>AQ</b>	Al-Qaeda	A multinational Sunni jihadist organization founded by Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan in the late 1980s.
<b>AQI</b>	Al-Qaeda in Iraq	The Iraqi Sunni al-Qaeda affiliate founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 1999.
<b>AQIM</b>	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb	An al-Qaeda affiliate operating in the Sahel region. It has been designated a terrorist organization by the US.
	Amazigh (Berber)	A non-Arab indigenous people in Libya. Amazigh communities are mainly present in western Libya, in Zuwara, and around the Nafusa mountains. They speak the Tamazight, an Amazigh language spoken across the Maghreb.
<b>AS</b>	Ansar al-Sharia Libya	Libya's most influential jihadist group, aligned with al-Qaeda. It has branches in Derna, Benghazi, Ajdabiya, Sirte, and elsewhere. There is also a Tunisian affiliate. It has been designated a terrorist organization by the US.
	Ayman al-Zawahiri	An Egyptian national who is the current leader of al-Qaeda.
<b>BDB</b>	Benghazi Defense Brigades	A coalition of anti-Haftar militias, allied with the BRSC, who aim to march on Benghazi to fight Haftar and the LNA. They are currently based in Jufra.
<b>BRSC</b>	Benghazi Revolutionaries' Shura Council	A coalition of Islamist and jihadist militias in Benghazi formed to oppose Haftar and the LNA.
<b>CDA</b>	Constitutional Drafting Assembly	A body elected in February 2014 with the mandate to draft a new constitution for Libya.
	Cyrenaica Emirate (wilayat barqa)	ISIS's branch in eastern Libya.
<b>DMSC</b>	Derna Mujahadeen Shura Councils	A coalition of Islamist and jihadist militias in Derna opposed to both Haftar and ISIS.
	Farjan	A tribal group in Libya's central coastal region that mostly supported Qaddafi. Haftar hails from this tribe.
	Fayez al-Serraj	Head of the Presidential Council and prime minister of the Government of National Accord.
	Federalists	An alliance between various political factions and militias who support greater political and economic autonomy for the eastern region of Cyrenaica.
	Fezzan Emirate	ISIS's branch in southern Libya.
<b>GNC</b>	General National Congress	Libya's first interim parliament elected in July 2012, with headquarters in Tripoli. It was meant to be replaced by the HoR in June 2014 but refused to hand over power.

<b>GNA</b>	Government of National Accord	The LPA-brokered unity government appointed by the PC, and in theory approved by the HoR.
<b>HCS</b>	High Council of State	The LPA-brokered consultative body mainly comprising former GNC members with a say over some high-level appointments.
<b>HoR</b>	House of Representatives	Libya's second interim parliament elected in June 2014. The HoR took up residence in Tobruq in eastern Libya after Libya Dawn and the GNA drove it out of Tripoli. The HoR remains Libya's internationally recognized parliament under the Libyan Political Agreement.
	Ibrahim Jadhnan	Jadhnan is a Federalist militia leader who led the Petroleum Facilities Guard blockades of oil fields in the Oil Crescent.
<b>IYSC</b>	Islamic Youth Shura Council	A jihadist militia mainly comprising Libyan returnees from Syria that declared allegiance to ISIS in late 2014.
<b>ISIS</b>	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham	A violent Sunni jihadist group established in Iraq in the 2000s.
	Khalid bin Rajeb al-Furjani	An anti-ISIS Salafist cleric from Sirte who was killed during an attempted ISIS abduction in Sirte.
	Khalifa al-Ghwell	A Misratan politician who became the prime minister of the GNC's parallel National Salvation government in Tripoli in 2015 and launched a coup attempt to re-establish his defunct government in October 2016.
	Khalifa Haftar	A former Colonel under Qaddafi, he defected in the 1980s and returned to fight against Qaddafi in 2011. He now leads the Dignity/ LNA faction in eastern Libya.
<b>LSF1</b>	Libya Shield 1	Libya Shield 1 unit in eastern Libya was formed under the LSF structure and comprises several Islamist and jihadist militias. LS1 joined the BRSC coalition in Benghazi.
<b>LSF</b>	Libya Shield Forces	The LSF initially formed as coalitions of revolutionary militias across the country to which the Defense Ministry gave authority to act as a stabilization force.
<b>LIFG</b>	Libyan Islamic Fighting Group	An Islamist group formed in the 1990s by Libyans who had fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan with the aim of overthrowing Qaddafi.
<b>LNA</b>	Libyan National Army	The umbrella of militias commanded by Haftar after he was appointed commander in chief of the "Libyan National Army" in March 2015. Most of the Operation Dignity forces were reconstituted into the LNA.
<b>LPA</b>	Libyan Political Agreement	A UN-brokered political unity deal signed in December 2015 that established new executive and consultative bodies to rule Libya.
	Mehdi al-Herati	A prominent militia commander in Tripoli during and after the Libyan revolution, who spent most of his life in Ireland. He set up the Umma brigade in Syria in early 2012 and later became mayor of Tripoli.
<b>Misrata</b>	Misrata	A wealthy port city in western Libya that played a key role in defeating Qaddafi's forces during the 2011 uprisings. Misratan militias are one of the most powerful armed factions in Libya and tend to be religiously conservative. The military campaign against ISIS in Sirte was led by Misratan militias.
	Mohamed al-Zahawi	The leader of Ansar al-Sharia who died in January 2015.

	Mohamed Hassan Qaid (aka Abu Yahya al-Libi)	He was a Libyan “Afghan Arab” who became an al-Qaeda commander. In 2012, he was killed in a drone strike in Pakistan.
	Muammar al-Qaddafi	The ruler of Libya from 1969 until he was killed in 2011.
<b>MB</b>	Muslim Brotherhood	The MB is a transnational Sunni Islamist organization founded in Egypt. The MB established the Justice and Construction Party in Libya in March 2012.
	Mustafa Abdul Jalil	President of the now-defunct National Transitional Council (NTC).
	Nasir Attiyah al-Akar	A DMSC commander killed by ISIS in 2015.
<b>NSG</b>	National Salvation Government	The government appointed by the defunct GNC in 2014.
<b>NTC</b>	National Transitional Council	The semi-sovereign umbrella body that tasked itself with leading the anti-Qaddafi uprisings and representing them abroad.
	Nazih Abdul-Hamid Nabih al-Ruqai (aka Abu Anas al-Libi)	A Libyan national and a senior al-Qaeda leader, he died in US custody in early 2015, awaiting trial on charges for his role in the 1998 US embassy bombings.
<b>Dignity</b>	Operation Dignity	Military alliance formed in May 2014 by Khalifa Haftar in eastern Libya with the aim of defeating a broadly defined group of “terrorists” in Benghazi. At the start of Operation Dignity, it enjoyed the support of Zintani militias in western Libya.
<b>Dawn</b>	Operation Libya Dawn	Military alliance formed in July 2014 to counter Operation Dignity. It mainly comprised religiously conservative and Islamist militias from Misrata and western Libya.
<b>Shuruq</b>	Operation Sunrise	A military operation launched in December 2014 by Libya Dawn elements in an attempt to take control of oil facilities and ports in the Oil Crescent.
	Osama bin Laden	The founder and former leader of al-Qaeda who was killed in 2011.
<b>PFG</b>	Petroleum Facilities Guard	The umbrella organization for forces guarding Libya’s oil infrastructure, including oil fields, pipelines and ports. Some PFG units in the Oil Crescent region supported Ibrahim Jadhra and the Federalists.
<b>PC</b>	Presidential Council	The LPA-brokered nine-member body that functions as the head of state, headed by the prime minister.
	Qadhadhfa	The tribe to which Qaddafi belonged
	Sadeq al-Ghariani	He is a Salafist who was appointed as Grand Mufti and head of the Dar al-Ifta, Libya’s highest religious authority, in May 2011. He is a controversial figure who has played a divisive role in Libya’s conflict since 2014.
	Saif al-Islam al-Qaddafi	The son and heir apparent of Muammar al-Qaddafi. He was held captive in Zintan from 2011 to June 2017 when he was rumored to be released.
<b>Saiqa</b>	Saiqa Special Forces	The Saiqa is one of Qaddafi’s former elite forces that joined the rebel forces in Benghazi early in the 2011 uprising. Saiqa is allied with Haftar and the LNA in Benghazi.

	Salafists	Salafists follow an ultra-conservative movement within Sunni Islam which advocates a return to the traditions of the Salaf (devout ancestors).
	Saleh Badi	A Misratan politician and militia leader who was a key commander in Libya Dawn.
	Salim Darbi	He was the head of the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade and the Derna Mujahadeen Shura Council (DMSC) coalition. He was killed by ISIS in 2015.
<b>SSC</b>	Supreme Security Council	The SSC were established in 2012 by the Interior minister as a quasi-police force, which absorbed mainly Misratan and Islamist-leaning brigades, an important subset of which comprised Salafists.
	Tebu	A dark-skinned African people present in southeastern Libya, and parts of Chad, Niger, and Sudan.
<b>Third</b>	Third Force	The Third Force is a Misratan-led unit of the Central Shield Forces that has been deployed in Sebha and southwest Libya.
<b>TMC</b>	Tripoli Military Council	A military body created shortly before the revolutionaries took control of Tripoli in August 2011.
	Tripolitania Emirate (wilayat trablous)	ISIS's branch in western Libya.
	Tuareg	A semi-nomadic people present in southern Libya and across the Sahara and the Sahel in parts of Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. They speak an Amazigh dialect of known as Tamasheq.
	Turki al-Binali	A young Bahraini cleric who was a recruiter for ISIS.
	Umar al-Mukhtar	He led the Libyan resistance against the Italians in the 1920s and early 1930s and is revered as a national hero.
	Umma Brigade	A Libyan militia created in Syria by Mehdi al-Herati. It has since been absorbed into the Free Syrian Army.
	Warfalla	A tribal group that supported Qaddafi.
	Wershefana	A tribal group that supported Qaddafi.
	Wissam Bin Hamid	The leader of the Libya Shield 1 unit in Benghazi who went on to lead the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC).
	Wissam Najim Abd Zayd al-Zubaydi (aka Abu Nabil al-Anbari)	An Iraqi national and veteran al-Qaeda in Iraq fighter who served as emir of ISIS in Libya, until he was killed during a US airstrike in Derna in November 2015.
<b>Zintan</b>	Zintan	A small town in the mountains south of Tripoli that played a key role in defeating Qaddafi's forces during the 2011 uprisings. They were driven out of Tripoli by Libya Dawn in 2014 but retain some influence. They are allied with Haftar.



## Atlantic Council Board of Directors

### CHAIRMAN

\*Jon M. Huntsman, Jr.

### CHAIRMAN EMERITUS, INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD

Brent Scowcroft

### PRESIDENT AND CEO

\*Frederick Kempe

### EXECUTIVE VICE CHAIRS

\*Adrienne Arsht

\*Stephen J. Hadley

### VICE CHAIRS

\*Robert J. Abernethy

\*Richard W. Edelman

\*C. Boyden Gray

\*George Lund

\*Virginia A. Mulberger

\*W. DeVier Pierson

\*John J. Studzinski

### TREASURER

\*Brian C. McK. Henderson

### SECRETARY

\*Walter B. Slocombe

### DIRECTORS

Stéphane Abrial

Odeh Aburdene

\*Peter Ackerman

Timothy D. Adams

Bertrand-Marc Allen

John R. Allen

\*Michael Andersson

Michael S. Ansari

Richard L. Armitage

David D. Aufhauser

Elizabeth F. Bagley

\*Rafic A. Bizri

Dennis C. Blair

\*Thomas L. Blair

Philip M. Breedlove

Reuben E. Brigety II

Myron Brilliant

\*Esther Brimmer

R. Nicholas Burns

\*Richard R. Burt

Michael Calvey

James E. Cartwright

John E. Chapoton

Ahmed Charai

Sandra Charles

Melanie Chen

Michael Chertoff

George Chopivsky

Wesley K. Clark

David W. Craig

\*Ralph D. Crosby, Jr.

Nelson W. Cunningham

Ivo H. Daalder

Ankit N. Desai

\*Paula J. Dobriansky

Christopher J. Dodd

Conrado Dornier

Thomas J. Egan, Jr.

\*Stuart E. Eizenstat

Thomas R. Eldridge

Julie Finley

Lawrence P. Fisher, II

\*Alan H. Fleischmann

\*Ronald M. Freeman

Laurie S. Fulton

Courtney Geduldig

\*Robert S. Gelbard

Thomas H. Glocer

Sherri W. Goodman

Mikael Hagström

Ian Hague

Amir A. Handjani

John D. Harris, II

Frank Haun

Michael V. Hayden

Annette Heuser

Ed Holland

\*Karl V. Hopkins

Robert D. Hormats

Miroslav Hornak

\*Mary L. Howell

Wolfgang F. Ischinger

Deborah Lee James

Reuben Jeffery, III

Joia M. Johnson

\*James L. Jones, Jr.

Lawrence S. Kanarek

Stephen R. Kappes

\*Maria Pica Karp

\*Zalmay M. Khalilzad

Robert M. Kimmitt

Henry A. Kissinger

Franklin D. Kramer

Richard L. Lawson

\*Jan M. Lodal

\*Jane Holl Lute

William J. Lynn

Izzat Majeed

Wendy W. Makins

Zaza Mamulaishvili

Mian M. Mansha

Gerardo Mato

William E. Mayer

T. Allan McArtor

John M. McHugh

Eric D.K. Melby

Franklin C. Miller

James N. Miller

Judith A. Miller

\*Alexander V. Mirtchev

Susan Molinari

Michael J. Morell

Richard Morningstar

Georgette Mosbacher

Thomas R. Nides

Franco Nuschese

Joseph S. Nye

Hilda Ochoa-Brillembourg

Sean C. O'Keefe

Ahmet M. Oren

Sally A. Painter

\*Ana I. Palacio

Carlos Pascual

Alan Pellegrini

David H. Petraeus

Thomas R. Pickering

Daniel B. Poneman

Daniel M. Price

Arnold L. Punaro

Robert Rangel

Thomas J. Ridge

Charles O. Rossotti

Robert O. Rowland

Harry Sachinis

Brent Scowcroft

Rajiv Shah

Stephen Shapiro

Kris Singh

James G. Stavridis

Richard J.A. Steele

Paula Stern

Robert J. Stevens

Robert L. Stout, Jr.

John S. Tanner

\*Ellen O. Tauscher

Nathan D. Tibbits

Frances M. Townsend

Clyde C. Tuggle

Paul Twomey

Melanne Verveer

Enzo Viscusi

Charles F. Wald

Michael F. Walsh

Maciej Witucki

Neal S. Wolin

Mary C. YatesDov S.

Zakheim

### HONORARY DIRECTORS

David C. Acheson

Madeleine K. Albright

James A. Baker, III

Harold Brown

Frank C. Carlucci, III

Ashton B. Carter

Robert M. Gates

Michael G. Mullen

Leon E. Panetta

William J. Perry

Colin L. Powell

Condoleezza Rice

Edward L. Rowny

George P. Shultz

Horst Teltschik

John W. Warner

William H. Webster

\*Executive Committee Members  
List as of June 19, 2017



The Atlantic Council is a nonpartisan organization that promotes constructive US leadership and engagement in international affairs based on the central role of the Atlantic community in meeting today's global challenges.

© 2017 The Atlantic Council of the United States. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Atlantic Council, except in the case of brief quotations in news articles, critical articles, or reviews. Please direct inquiries to:

Atlantic Council

1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor,  
Washington, DC 20005

(202) 463-7226, [www.AtlanticCouncil.org](http://www.AtlanticCouncil.org)