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Jihadism's Foothold in Libya

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Islamist extremism is limited in Libya, but it could grow if no action is taken against those responsible for recent violence.

The tragic death of U.S. ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other diplomatic personnel in yesterday's attack on the American consulate in Benghazi was the latest episode of violence attributed to Islamist extremists in Libya. A small contingent of local jihadists has emerged since Muammar Qadhafi's ouster, and they have applauded the recent attacks, though it is not clear how much responsibility they bear for carrying them out. The growth of such groups is a worrisome development that reinforces the importance of active U.S. engagement with the new Libyan authorities.

LIBYAN JIHADISM BEFORE THE WAR

Prior to the 2011 uprising, the country's main organized jihadist movement, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, had already deradicalized and retired. Founded after the anti-Soviet jihad, the LIFG attempted to overthrow the Qadhafi regime in the mid-1990s but began to move away from armed conflict in 2006. In 2009, the group's shura council members -- some in Libyan prison, others in exile in Europe -- negotiated an end to conflict with the regime via Qadhafi's son Saif al-Islam. The minority that disagreed with that decision joined al-Qaeda in Pakistan, leaving no organized presence in Libya. Therefore, on the eve of last year's war, organized violent jihadism in Libya was more or less extinct.

Once the uprising began, the LIFG stuck to its word and did not return to jihadist activities, even changing its name to the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change. As the rebellion unfolded, however, many members of the group joined the armed resistance, where they drew on their prior combat experience; most prominently, LIFG figure Abdul Hakim Belhaj became head of the Tripoli Military Council.

Following Qadhafi's fall, the LIFG split into two political factions that contested the July 2012 legislative elections: the broad-based moderate party Hizb al-Watan (HW), which Belhaj

joined, and the smaller, more conservative and Islamist-tinged Hizb al-Umma al-Wasat (HUW), which most other LIFG members joined under the leadership of prominent figure Sami al-Saadi. HW did not win any seats in the election, while HUW garnered one, which was allocated to Abdul Wahhab al-Qaed, brother of the late Abu Yahya al-Libi, a senior al-Qaeda figure.

NEW LOCAL GROUPS

Even as LIFG put down its arms after the war and joined the political process, new jihadist groups began to emerge once the dust settled. One of the largest is Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi (ASB), led by Muhammad Zahawi. In addition to online connections with the Ansar al-Sharia group in Tunisia, ASB has ties to several smaller Salafi-jihadist *katibas* (battalions) in Libya, including the shadowy Ansar al-Sharia in Darnah (ASD), led by former Guantanamo Bay inmate Abu Sufyan bin Qumu. Many of these *katibas* participated in the ASB's first "annual conference" this June; based on photos from the event, as many as a thousand individuals attended.

ASB's main concern is instituting Islamic law based on their narrow interpretation. According to recent reports, ASB, ASD, or other smaller *katibas* have been provoking the recent destruction of Sufi mosques and graves. Although ASB has not claimed responsibility for the incidents, it has applauded the perpetrators.

Another new actor is the shadowy "Imprisoned Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman Brigades," named after the spiritual leader of the Egyptian al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah who is currently serving a life sentence in the United States for involvement in the 1993 World Trade Center attack, among other plots. Not much is known about the group's leadership or size, but it was responsible for a series of attacks in Benghazi this May and June: two attacks against the International Committee of the Red Cross, a bomb attack against the U.S. consulate, and a strike on the British ambassador's convoy.

Currently, there are no known operational links between these Libyan groups and al-Qaeda or its affiliates. Earlier this year, CNN quoted unidentified intelligence reports indicating that al-Qaeda had sent operatives from Pakistan to set up cells in Libya, but no corroborating evidence has yet been offered. Al-Qaeda did attempt to exploit last year's uprising, especially since two of its senior leaders (Abu Yahya al-Libi and Atiyyatullah Abu Abd al-Rahman) were of Libyan origin. But both men have since been killed by U.S. drone strikes, which may be why the organization has not focused on Libya in 2012.

THE NORTH MALI JIHAD

One of the unintended consequences of Libya's uprising was how it affected Mali. The war opened a flow of weapons into northern Mali, which helped revive an ethno-tribal conflict that had been brewing on and off since the 1960s. This was not a jihadist conflict, but the gradual implantation over the previous decade of jihadist groups in the Sahel made them well placed to exploit the Malian government's loss of control in the north. While al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has been hovering in the background so as not to attract too much attention to itself, its allies Ansar al-Din and Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad have taken control of day-to-day governance in the northern Mali towns of Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu.

SYRIAN TRAINING CAMPS

Some veterans of the Libyan uprising have also become involved in the Syrian civil war -- an entirely different phenomenon that should not be confused with the growth of Libyan jihadism or the developments in Mali. Credible reports indicate that dozens of Libyans, if not more, have joined Liwaa al-Umma, an armed opposition group in Syria led by Mahdi al-Harati, an Irish-Libyan dual national who was previously a commander in the Tripoli Brigade. Four confirmed cases of Libyans dying on the Syrian battlefield have also been reported.

In addition, Libya has become a transfer point for fighters from Western Europe and the Maghreb headed to Syria. News reports and jihadist sources suggest that some of these individuals have attended training camps in Misratah, Benghazi, the desert area near Hon, and Green Mountain in the east, though the accuracy of these reports is unknown.

These fighters are not necessarily global jihadists or al-Qaeda sympathizers; many appear to subscribe to a more orthodox understanding of Islam. That said, foreign Islamist fighters who participated in a number of recent conflicts abroad have become agents of instability when they returned to their home countries -- for this reason alone, the Libyans in Syria merit close watching.

CONCLUSION

Libyan radicals had every reason to be encouraged by the government's inaction against those responsible for the recent destruction of Sufi mosques and graves. If yesterday's attack on the U.S. consulate prompts little official response, vigilantism will grow and perhaps lead to antigovernment violence. Going forward, Washington and Tripoli should share whatever intelligence they have on the jihadists so that they can work together to counter the problem.

Moreover, it is vital for Washington to understand that the jihadist trend in Libya has little popular support -- militias and tribes continue to hold far greater public sway. Most Libyans are hostile toward Islamist extremism, as seen in the lackluster performance of LIFG remnants and the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood in the recent elections. Nevertheless, the United States should pressure Tripoli for a substantive and serious investigation of the death of Ambassador Stevens and other personnel.

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