



## THE OTHERS

### Foreign Fighters in Libya

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OVER THE PAST SEVEN YEARS, jihadist activism has proliferated across multiple arenas, joined by an unprecedented number of individuals who have become foreign fighters. Much of the focus has understandably been on foreign fighter flows to Syria, but Libya has also seen a major influx. In fact, Libya now stands as the fourth-largest foreign fighter mobilization in global jihadist history, behind only the current war in Syria, the Afghan jihad of the 1980s, and the 2003 Iraq war. Moreover, it marks the first time East and West Africans have truly become involved with foreign fighting abroad versus sticking to local insurgencies or terrorism. Attacks in Britain on May 22, 2017, and Germany on December 19, 2016, both connected to the Islamic State (IS) in Libya, demonstrate the possible consequences abroad of the Libyan jihad. All such factors indicate the value of examining Libya's foreign fighter network and the insights it offers regarding the future trajectory of jihadism in North, East, and West Africa, as well as Western Europe.



Libya deserves attention not just for the jihad that has played out there over the past several years, but also because it offers a potential future jihadist hub given the collapse in 2017 of IS centers in Iraq and Syria. Although no signs suggest IS plans to move its operational center from the Levant to Libya, despite worries to this effect by Western officials,<sup>1</sup> aspiring jihadists in Europe might see an attractive opportunity in the North African state, given its proximity to the European continent.

In seeking to shed light on many areas of the foreign fighter phenomenon in Libya, this paper will: (1) explore the numbers of individuals to travel to Libya since the 2011 revolution and the nationalities they represent; (2) examine the history and evolution of the foreign fighter mobilization in Libya, from the revolution through the present day, which constitutes the quietest phase yet, linked to the Islamic State's loss of territorial control; (3) identify different foreign fighter networks and hubs of origin, and fighters' routes to Libya; and (4) probe the ways in which returnees might incubate their own networks for future jihads, whether at home through terrorism or abroad through the next foreign fighter mobilization.

## Statistics on Foreign Fighters in Libya

Analyzing foreign fighter data in Libya in 2018 is akin to surveying such data in Syria in 2012–13. Then and now, most governments have not publicly disclosed the number of their citizens to join the jihad abroad. Therefore, as with the early mobilization in Syria, foreign fighter data on Libya in recent years relies primarily on open-source information, possibly leading some to question its validity. Ultimately, though, one finds that analysis of open-source data from firsthand jihadist materials, leaked jihadist administrative documents, court files, local Arab media, and Western media since 2011 provides a relatively good snapshot of the broader phenomenon. Indeed, since 2014, the governments of Tunisia, Sudan, Kenya, and Senegal have released the numbers of their citizens who traveled or attempted to travel to Libya to fight. Some countries have deflated the numbers, with Sudan claiming only seventy individuals to have traveled or attempted to travel to Libya and Syria combined.<sup>2</sup> Research for this paper reveals, by comparison, that one hundred Sudanese have traveled or attempted to travel to Libya alone, with an ever-larger contingent likely going to Syria.

### KEY POINTS

- ▶ The Libyan uprising and revolution provided a space for jihadist groups to operate and subsequently recruit foreign fighters to fight locally, train for jihad in Syria, or train for attacks in other countries.
- ▶ The highest representation of foreign fighters in Libya comes from Tunisia.
- ▶ Again in Tunisia, a continued lack of progress on post-revolution economic and structural reforms could lead to instability and thus a major security problem.
- ▶ All vectors of Tunisian jihadism—foreign fighters in Libya and Syria as well as homegrown militants in and out of prison—represent a national problem rather than one localized to a city or two, or to a particular region.
- ▶ In continental Africa, south of the Maghreb region, a potential exists for further growth and dispersion of jihadist activism through either al-Qaeda or IS affiliates.
- ▶ Before the formation of the IS caliphate in 2014, most foreign fighters in Libya came from within North Africa, a trend that persisted afterward, but with larger concentrations from continental Africa and other locales.
- ▶ The idea of the caliphate was a crucial motivator for expanded foreign fighter mobilization, resonating especially in East and West Africa.
- ▶ The presence of foreign fighters emerged as a recruitment tool for IS in Libya.
- ▶ The core founders of IS in Libya included operatives from Katibat al-Battar al-Libiyah, an elite group within IS in Syria that helped train many figures central to the major 2015–16 attacks in Belgium and France, illustrating why European officials worry about Libya becoming a future node for IS external operations.
- ▶ Among those foreign fighters trained in Libya were women.

Tunisia, in particular, has played a major role in both the Syrian and Libyan jihads, contributing the highest numbers of any country to both campaigns. Indeed, the status of Libya and Tunisia as geographic neighbors makes the latter finding easier to explain. In meetings with the United Nations, Tunisian government officials have revealed that up to 1,500 Tunisians have mobilized to fight in Libya.<sup>3</sup> The author has been able to identify 625 of these cases, illustrating the gap between what is known publicly versus more privately (by the government) or clandestinely (through the different jihadist groups). Unlike Tunisia, the examples of Kenya and Senegal do not show a large gap between government estimates and publicly available information. Kenyan police have identified 20 nationals as having mobilized to fight in Libya, of which the author has confirmed 16.<sup>4</sup> In Senegal, officials claim that up to 30 individuals have mobilized, with all of them being identifiable according to the author's research.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to open-source research and governmental data, in September 2017, the Libyan Attorney General's Office, based in Tripoli, released information on foreign fighters who have joined IS. The data is based on a multiyear investigation as well as numbers of prisoners captured and fighters' bodies identified following the fight against IS in Sirte. Therefore, one sees mainly a portrait of the broader foreign fighter phenomenon after the rise of IS in Libya, and in Sirte in particular, rather than earlier and in other areas of Libya. The information is nonetheless valuable considering that it would be unavailable from open sources or foreign governments. Separately, the Attorney General's Office did provide greater detail on numbers of fighters from certain countries, counting more than 100, respectively, from Tunisia, Egypt, and Sudan; between 50 and 100, respectively, from Senegal, Gambia, Chad, Niger, Ghana, Eritrea, Mali, and Somalia; between 10 and 50, respectively, from Saudi Arabia, the Palestinian territories, Morocco, Mauritania, Yemen, and Algeria; and between 1 and 10, respectively, from Iraq, the United States, Syria, Qatar, Nepal, Burundi, France, and Jordan.

Therefore, analysts can quantify the overall foreign fighter mobilization to Libya by relying on any of three sources: open-source data, the official numbers from respective governments, or counts from the Libyan Attorney General's Office. In sum, the open-source data indicates 1,351 individuals from at least forty-one

nations who have joined or attempted to join jihadist groups in Libya since 2011, whereas combining foreign government and Libyan attorney general counts drives the number up to 3,436. The case for the higher end includes the likelihood that individuals confirmed through open-source data on countries yet to divulge foreign fighter figures does not reflect the full picture. For example, the Moroccan press has claimed that 300 Moroccans have gone to Libya, in comparison with 58 confirmed cases in the author's data set.<sup>6</sup> As a result, in deducing from open sources, governmental disclosures, and data from Libya's Attorney General's Office, one would not be shocked to conclude that, over the past seven years, 2,600–3,500 foreigners have joined or attempted to join jihadist groups in Libya (see Table 1). This is just a shade below the mobilization of foreign fighters to Iraq from 2003 to 2011 (4,000–5,000).

While not as many nationalities are represented among foreign fighters in Libya as in Syria, one finds plenty of diversity, with fighters hailing from North Africa, the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, West Africa, Western Europe, the Balkans, North America, and South and Southeast Asia. Before the revolution, some of these individuals had been migrant laborers in Libya, helping explain the presence of nations without much history in jihadism or foreign fighting. For example, an Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL) video released in mid-May 2014 shows the group welcoming two Ghanaian migrants who converted from Christianity to Islam.<sup>7</sup> Similarly idiosyncratic are cases like Mohammed Naser Packeer and Tabrez Mohammad Tambe, two Indian nationals in their twenties who were recruited as migrant workers in Dubai and Riyadh, respectively.<sup>8</sup>

The engagement by both East and West Africans also represents a noteworthy trend, as already mentioned. Historically, most such Africans to become involved with jihadism have focused on domestic or nearby conflict zones, such as in Mali, Nigeria, and Somalia, while generally eschewing more-transnational mobilizations. Now, however, these fighters could well apply lessons learned from the Libyan jihad in their local insurgencies, or else to stoke recruitment efforts in countries such as Chad, Eritrea, Ghana, Gambia, Kenya, or Senegal. Demonstrating how all this came to pass, the following section explores the history of foreign fighter flows and mobilization to Libya since the revolution began in 2011.

Table 1. Foreign Fighter Mobilization to Libya, 2011–17

	OPEN-SOURCE	GOVT	LIBYAN ATT GEN	LOW EST.	HIGH EST.
Tunisia	625	1,500	100+	1,500	1,500
Morocco	58	300*	10–50	58	300
Algeria	130		10–50	130	130
Egypt	112		100+	112	112
Sudan	100	70	100+	100	100
Senegal	30	30	50–100	50	100
Mali	8		50–100	50	100
Somalia	7		50–100	50	100
Ghana	5		50–100	50	100
Chad	3		50–100	50	100
Eritrea	4		50–100	50	100
Gambia	Unknown†		50–100	50	100
Niger	Unknown		50–100	50	100
France	66		1–10	66	66
Saudi Arabia	18		10–50	18	50
Palestinian Territories	11		10–50	11	50
Yemen	6		10–50	10	50
Mauritania	6		10–50	10	50
Syria	Dozens		1–10	~36	~36
United Kingdom	36			36	36
Belgium	21			21	21
Nigeria	21			21	21
Kenya	16	20		20	20
Rwanda	Unknown	20‡			20
United States	9		1–10	9	10
Jordan	5		1–10	5	10
Iraq	3		1–10	3	10
Qatar	1		1–10	1	10
Nepal	Unknown		1–10	1	10
Burundi	Unknown		1–10	1	10
Canada	5			5	5
India	4			4	4
Spain	3			3	3
Ethiopia	1			1	1
Philippines	1			1	1
Bosnia	1			1	1
Australia	Unknown			Unknown	Unknown
Afghanistan	Unknown			Unknown	Unknown
Bangladesh	Unknown			Unknown	Unknown
Indonesia	Unknown			Unknown	Unknown
Malaysia	Unknown			Unknown	Unknown
Netherlands	Unknown			Unknown	Unknown
Pakistan	Unknown			Unknown	Unknown

\* Based on an unconfirmed government estimate from the Moroccan press

† Unknown classification signifies that the country has been mentioned in the media as having foreign nationals in Libya, but without direct confirmation.

‡ According to Graeme Wood, who interviewed Rwandan officials in Kigali about the country's flow of nationals to Libya in 2016.

## The History of Foreign Fighters in Libya

In the early stages of the Libyan revolution, certain individuals and dual nationals who had grown up in countries such as Britain, Ireland, Canada, and the United States joined the fight against the regime of Muammar Qadhafi for either nationalist or other reasons.<sup>9</sup> Yet, as the fight continued and especially following Qadhafi's death, the vast majority of foreign fighters could be identified with jihadist ideology.

### THE LIBYAN REVOLUTION

Before a base can be established for foreign fighters, local jihadist networks must create a space that allows such fighters to prosper. Therefore, while the first U.S. reports of foreign fighters trickling into Libya occurred in September 2011,<sup>10</sup> jihadist sources had revealed the arrival of so-called Libyan mujahedin a full six months earlier, in March 2011, to fight the Qadhafi regime.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, early on within nearby countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Mali, Morocco, and Tunisia, individuals began joining groups to train and eventually fight in Libya,<sup>12</sup> illustrating the comparatively regional composition of the first foreign fighters.

Wolfram Lacher suggests that while the revolutionary brigades that overthrew Qadhafi were mainly nationalist in character, a number of jihadists fought alongside them.<sup>13</sup> These individuals fell within three generations: (1) former members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) who had rejected the ideological revisions established by the group in 2009; (2) Libyans who served as foreign fighters at the height of the Iraq war; and (3) newcomers to jihadism who had gained exposure to the ideology online and through the prior two jihadist generations, following the start of the Libyan revolution. Indeed, the ecumenical nature of the revolutionary fighting forces provided space for the jihadists, who were highly motivated, to establish themselves. Moreover, the shared exuberance of overthrowing the regime resulted in shortsightedness among more-nationalist forces, which failed to marginalize the jihadists. This, in turn, provided the space for these jihadist actors to recruit foreign fighters and eventually form their own organizations following Qadhafi's death.

For example, former LIFG members helped found or became key figures in a number of insurgent forces—including Katibat Shuhada Abu Salim, Katibat Umar al-

Mukhtar, Haras al-Watani, Katibat Rafallah al-Sahati, and Katibat al-Nur—that would eventually develop ties with ASL, the dominant jihadist group in Libya prior to the Islamic State’s rise in spring 2014.<sup>14</sup> Here, al-Qaeda saw an opportunity, as mentioned by senior leader Atiyah Abd al-Rahman al-Libi in a letter addressed to Osama bin Laden on May 5, 2011<sup>15</sup>: “Brothers from the Libyan [Islamic] Fighting Group and others are out of jail. There has been an active jihadist Islamic renaissance under way in Eastern Libya (Benghazi, Darnah, Bayda, and that area) for some time, just waiting for this kind of opportunity. We think that the brothers’ activities, their names, and their ‘recordings’ will start to show up soon.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, many within the exiled LIFG families who had relocated to Manchester, England, returned to Libya to serve in these groups.<sup>17</sup> Among the younger generation, most had never even visited Libya, imbuing their “return” with a sense of foreignness.<sup>18</sup> Bilal Bet-tamer, a young Libyan activist now working to promote national reconciliation, believes 60–70 percent of these more hardline groups were largely fortified by Libyan expatriates, especially those based in the northeastern coastal city of Darnah.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, comparatively mainstream factions such as the February 17 Brigade looked the other way as ASL grew in late 2011 and early 2012. Indeed, in June 2014, this brigade eventually joined the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council, an ASL umbrella, as part of a push to rebrand and protect itself against the offensive, known as Operation Karama, pursued by the anti-Islamist Gen. Khalifa Haftar against militants in Benghazi.<sup>20</sup> This case illustrates how, over time, a jihadist group like ASL could gain leverage over other factions when given the chance to prosper.

ASL, which formally announced its creation in December 2011 in Darnah and February 2012 in Benghazi,<sup>21</sup> would serve as the infrastructure that enabled foreign fighting to flourish within Libya. ASL thus became a conduit for foreign fighter training, external operations training, logistics, and facilitation, eventually developing ties with Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Syrian jihad.

## THE AST/ASL NEXUS

Among the immediate consequences of civil war in Libya was the safe haven the country implicitly offered for various Tunisian jihadist activities. Once in Libya, Tunisians would either fight there, smuggle weapons back to Tun-

sia, or undergo training before attempting an attack in Tunisia or joining the fight in Syria. In establishing their relationship, AST and ASL used both overt and covert methods, the former in relation to *dawa* and social service programs and the latter for insurgent activities.

AST, in particular, would also use its overt *dawa* activities for cover. For example, the first *dawa*-type activity organized by AST was its assistance to refugees on the Tunisia-Libya border in March 2011.<sup>22</sup> When posting about these activities on its official Facebook page, AST included photographs of its members erecting temporary housing, supplying tents, and providing food and medical care to refugees once they crossed the border.<sup>23</sup> Unbeknownst to the refugees, according to the International Crisis Group, AST used this opportunity to buy and sell military equipment in their preaching tents at the refugee camp.<sup>24</sup> These weapons were mainly sold by former Qadhafi-regime loyalists.<sup>25</sup>

A so-called democratization process exacerbated the growth in weapons smuggling. After the fall of Tunisian president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, jihadists were especially keen to exploit such opportunities. Abu Bakr al-Hakim, an AST and later IS leader who was eventually killed in November 2016, explained the situation: “Libya was next to us and weapons were widespread there. So we went to Libya and established a training camp. We would train brothers there and at the same time we would work to smuggle weapons into Tunisia.”<sup>26</sup> These smuggling activities helped facilitate the relationship among AST members, Tunisian foreign fighters in Libya, and ASL. And AST-ASL ties would only deepen.

The Tunisian Ali bin al-Tahar bin al-Falih al-Awni al-Harzi, one of the key players in the ASL attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi in September 2012, belonged to AST. Following his interrogation by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation in Tunis and subsequent release by Tunisian authorities, owing to alleged lack of evidence, AST published a video lauding Harzi’s freedom.<sup>27</sup> (He would later become a leader with IS in Syria.) The Egyptians also involved in this attack eventually retreated to their cell in Nasr City, Cairo, where they were either arrested or killed.<sup>28</sup>

In June 2012, three months before the U.S. consulate strike, ASL attacks against Tunisian diplomatic facilities—one in Tripoli, two in Benghazi—were believed to have been responses to an art exhibition in La Marsa, a Tunis suburb, where Salafi-jihadists rioted to protest

what they deemed un-Islamic art.<sup>29</sup> Further evidence of the close ASL-AST relationship emerged in a video leaked online in December 2016, showing AST leader Abu Iyad al-Tunisi (formal name: Saif Allah bin Hussein) in late 2014 praying over the dead body of ASL founder Muhammad al-Zahawi, in Benghazi.<sup>30</sup>

Signs of Tunisians training in Libya emerged as early as spring 2012, when two Tunisians were detained in the Darnah region after completing military exercises with ASL in Benghazi.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, a number of Tunisian passports were seized in November 2013 from an ASL base in Benghazi.<sup>32</sup> Beyond Benghazi, ASL provided training in Darnah, Misratah, Hun, and Jabal al-Akhdar.<sup>33</sup> These same camps had hosted two Tunisian suicide bombers before their failed October 2013 attacks on the beach in Sousse (not to be confused with the successful mass shooting in June 2015) and at the Bourguiba mausoleum in Monastir.<sup>34</sup>

A case study in a *HuffPost* article aptly illustrates the symbiosis between AST and ASL. The subject, “Mehdi,” comes from the poor Tunis neighborhood of Douar Hicher,<sup>35</sup> a known hotspot for jihadist activism. As a consequence of disappointed expectations following the Tunisian revolution—one of the leading reasons Tunisians have enlisted with jihadist groups either locally or abroad—Mehdi found purpose in joining AST and later ASL. He noted: “I swear to God, 90 percent of the people who join [jihadi groups], Tunisians, especially from my neighborhood, have nothing to do—and that is the worst.”<sup>36</sup> In April 2012, after being recruited in his neighborhood by AST, he joined ASL and trained in Sirte, Libya, where he learned to shoot and practiced dismantling and assembling Kalashnikovs, among other tasks.<sup>37</sup> Although he earned \$3,000 per month, far more than any job would pay him in Tunisia, he eventually returned home at his mother’s request. Mehdi’s experience and trajectory are not uncommon for the many Tunisians who have become foreign fighters in Libya.

## AQIM IN LIBYA

Besides AST, another group to use Libya for training, fighting, and planning attacks is AQIM. In August 2012, a Library of Congress report argued that ASL was a front for AQIM within Libya;<sup>38</sup> in retrospect, ASL and AST appear to have both been fronts for al-Qaeda activity following the revolutions in Tunisia and Libya. The report identified Abu Anas al-Libi as the “builder of al-Qaeda’s

network in Libya” and referred to him as an intermediary between al-Qaeda senior leadership in Pakistan and the group’s leaders on the ground in Libya.<sup>39</sup> This was further confirmed in the aforementioned letter written by Atiyah Abd al-Rahman al-Libi to Osama bin Laden, wherein Libi explains that “brother Anas al-Subi’i al-Libi [Abu Anas al-Libi] and others have sought permission to go to Libya...In short, I gave him permission to go to Libya.”<sup>40</sup> AQIM’s presence also provided connective tissue for its operations in Mali, whether through weapons smuggling, recruitment of foreign fighters, service as a safe base for fighters following France’s January 2013 Operation Serval intervention in northern Mali, or training and planning for terrorist attacks abroad.

The connection between ASL’s network in Benghazi and Darnah and AQIM’s in Mali was cemented no later than early 2012.<sup>41</sup> In the run-up to Operation Serval, ASL sent a number of its members to assist AQIM and its auxiliary groups *Jamaat at-Tawhid wal-Jihad* in West Africa and *Ansar al-Din*. The roughly contemporaneous founding of *Ansar al-Sharia* in Mali could indicate another link.<sup>42</sup> Such a north-south mapping helps establish how AQIM and ASL, along with their foreign fighter contingents and other affiliates, could exploit parts of southern Libya for their benefit.

Still, the presence of jihadist groups is “a challenge in the south, but should not be overblown,” as Lacher notes. These groups, he continues, “have exploited the lack of southern governance for logistics and training.”<sup>43</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr comment that “jihadist groups in southern Libya have focused on establishing training camps and supply lines rather than seizing and holding territory.”<sup>44</sup> This explains how AQIM and later IS could exploit the porous, vast desert territory without necessarily having large-scale local support, instead relying on strong organizational backing from foreigners or Libyans from the north.

Some local support did exist, though, such as through Tuareg whose territory overlaps southern Libya and northern Mali. These figures helped facilitate the movement of individuals across borders, especially following the French intervention. For example, Brigade 315, which is based in the southern town of Awbari and protects part of the Libyan border, is led by Ahmad Omar al-Ansari, a former deputy commander of *Ansar al-Din*, AQIM’s ethnic Tuareg front group in Mali.<sup>45</sup> Western intelligence officials believe individuals such as the Algerian Mokhtar Belmokhtar used this course to

retreat northward in late 2012 to plan the attack on Algeria's In Amenas gas facility,<sup>46</sup> launched five days after the start of Operation Serval.<sup>47</sup>

Among Belmokhtar's cadre to train in the Awbari region for the In Amenas attack, which killed thirty-seven hostages, were other Algerians, as well as Libyans and nationals of Mali, Tunisia, Egypt, France, Mauritania, and Morocco.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, Belmokhtar used southern Libya to plan simultaneous suicide truck bomb attacks for May 23, 2013, in Niger, which hit a French-owned uranium mine in Arlit and a military base 150 miles away in Agadez.<sup>49</sup> According to the UN Security Council, much of the training for those involved was facilitated by ASL.<sup>50</sup> The earlier visit by a delegation of unidentified tribesman from Awbari, on March 19, 2013, to Benghazi is therefore not especially surprising. The purpose of this trip, according to ASL, was for the tribesman to acquaint themselves with the organization.<sup>51</sup> Another filament in the web of jihadist ties in North Africa and the Sahel thus becomes visible.

In addition to these networks, in late 2014, an Egyptian jihadist network supportive of al-Qaeda formed in Libya. Following the announcement that November of the Islamic State's so-called Sinai Province, which was created from the group Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, a former ABM military commander, Hisham Ali Ashmawi (aka Abu Omar al-Muhajir al-Masri), left the group over his objections to aligning with IS. In the aftermath of the province's creation, Ashmawi fled to Darnah, where he established the al-Murabitun Brigade,<sup>52</sup> which has since focused its attacks on the Nile Valley and Western Desert regions of Egypt.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, according to IS sources, Ashmawi is linked to the Mujahedin Shura Council of Darnah and Its Suburbs, a pro-al-Qaeda group that the city's ASL members joined after its formation in December 2014.<sup>54</sup>

Despite the limited name recognition of Ashmawi and his group, al-Murabitun has conducted a number of high-profile attacks. Most notable was the June 2015 assassination of Egyptian public prosecutor Hisham Barakat via a car bomb.<sup>55</sup> More recently, in late October 2017, Ashmawi dispatched his deputy,<sup>56</sup> Abu Hatim Imad al-Din Abd al-Hamid, to conduct an attack against Egyptian police in the Bahariya oasis in the Western Desert,<sup>57</sup> killing at least sixteen.<sup>58</sup> Interestingly the attack was claimed under the name Jamaat Ansar al-Islam (JAI), instead of al-Murabitun, possibly indicating that al-Murabitun has progressed to a point

where it can conduct more frequent attacks. Egyptian officials believe that although JAI continues to get directives from Ashmawi and much of the logistics and facilitation occur in Libya, the group now has training camps in Egypt.<sup>59</sup> Time will tell if this development represents a fresh threat to Egypt or something impermanent. Either way, the network led by Ashmawi represents an active Libya-based foreign player.

## TRAINING CAMPS FOR THE SYRIAN WAR

Along with assisting like-minded movements from North Africa, Mali, and Egypt, ASL has provided training as well as logistical and facilitation support to individuals seeking to fight in Syria. Indeed, some Syrians even traveled to Libya to train with ASL before returning home to use their new skills against the Assad regime. After the founding of the IS caliphate in spring 2014, Syria-based Libyan fighters and others from the group were dispatched to Libya to establish new "provinces." Altogether, the thoroughfare originating in Libya was so notorious that a U.S. defense official described it as "the I-95 for foreign fighters into Syria from Africa."<sup>60</sup>

The earliest known training camps to later send fighters to Syria were set up in spring 2012, following the founding of ASL. The camps, according to separate reports from two Tunisians who were captured after their training, were located within Benghazi. Courses, which lasted twenty to thirty days, included segments on weapons training, guerrilla warfare, booby traps, and surprise attacks.<sup>61</sup> Reports suggest Sabratha was another location for trainees linked to Syria,<sup>62</sup> and other locales mentioned earlier in other contexts likely also hosted Syria aspirants. For example, then Libyan prime minister Ali Zidan noted that investigations had turned up Algerians, Nigerians, Sudanese, and Tunisians in Benghazi attempting to go fight in Syria.<sup>63</sup>

Up until mid-2013, the vast majority of foreigners seeking to fight in Syria were planning to join Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate, but calculations changed during the period from late 2013 through summer 2014, as the Islamic State grew stronger in Iraq and Syria. Based on IS personnel files, leaked in March 2016, of the sixteen foreign fighters who mentioned having previously trained or fought in Libya before joining IS in Syria, six noted their membership in ASL. Within this group, thirteen were from Tunisia, two were from Egypt, and one was from Bosnia.

As for the Syrians who traveled to Libya for training, especially early in the Syrian conflict, the North African country likely provided greater safety as compared to the bombardment from the Assad regime, with neither jihadists nor rebels having yet liberated significant Syrian territory. According to border officials in Benghazi, the process was highly organized and well financed.<sup>64</sup> Even immigration officials at Benghazi's airport were members of ASL, helping ease travel to and from Libya.<sup>65</sup> These airport officials, moreover, reported that about ten to fifteen Syrian fighters arrived each week for training.<sup>66</sup>

## THE ISLAMIC STATE PROJECT IN LIBYA

After fighters streamed from Libya to Syria in 2012–13, the trajectory reversed itself in spring 2014, aimed at bolstering the Islamic State's attempt to establish a base in Libya. This reverse flow, as noted, included Libyans who had trained and fought with IS in Iraq and Syria, but also a cadre of foreign fighters. Such forces would establish relations with some ASL figures who would eventually defect, helping IS quickly build its infrastructure in Libya, in part by exploiting jihadist resources.<sup>67</sup>

The Islamic State in Libya was formed by a combination of pro-IS individuals based in Darnah, returning Libyans and other foreign fighters in Syria's *Katibat al-Battar al-Libiyah* (KBL), and the ASL defectors. According to an investigation by the Libyan Attorney General's Office and al-Bunyan al-Marsus, the Misratan-led fighting force that defeated IS in Sirte in 2016, Hassan al-Salihin Belarj (aka Abu Habiba) helped set up IS recruitment efforts in Darnah before the return of KBL operatives in spring 2014.<sup>68</sup>

The UN claims that IS began planting the seeds for its emergence in Libya between March and May 2013, when the prominent Bahraini religious ideologue Turki al-Binali toured the country, giving religious lectures, meeting key jihadist figures, and providing *ijazas* (authorizations to transmit a certain text or subject).<sup>69</sup> Worth noting here is that Binali traveled to Libya at ASL's invitation. Still, his trip may have filled his Rolodex so as to lay the grounds for his ultimate decision to join the Islamic State, in which he later became a key leader in August 2013.<sup>70</sup> Alternatively, April 2013 marked the month when the jihadist group renamed itself Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (having formerly been the Islamic State of Iraq). The possibility therefore also exists that Binali had already effectively expressed allegiance

to the group and was secretly courting adherents outside the Levant, in the guise of visiting ASL networks, both to boost its credibility against al-Qaeda and in anticipation of its eventual caliphate announcement in June 2014. Further clarification could indeed come if IS releases a martyrdom story on Binali, who was killed in an airstrike in Syria on May 31, 2017.

By April 2014, the Islamic State had established a front group in Darnah called *Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam* (MSSI),<sup>71</sup> which was welcomed officially into the fold that November, when IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced he would be expanding caliphate territory beyond Iraq and Syria.<sup>72</sup> Reflecting how, from the beginning, foreign fighters played a role in the Islamic State's Libyan provinces, the original chief mufti of MSSI was the Yemeni Abu al-Bara al-Azdi, while the Saudi Abu Habib al-Jazrawi accepted MSSI's official *baya* to Baghdadi.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, the two leaders of IS in Libya have been Iraqis sent by Baghdadi: Wassim al-Zubaidi (Abu al-Mughirah al-Qahtani), who was killed in an airstrike in Darnah in November 2015, and Abdul Qadr al-Najdi (Abu Muaz al-Tikriti), who is currently at large. Many other leadership positions within IS in Libya were filled by foreign nationals as well.

Soon after expanding its project beyond Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State likewise began announcing foreign martyrs in its media releases. To encourage greater emigration to Libya, IS released a story about how one Saudi fighter, Abdul Hamid al-Qasimi, had traveled to the country to help build *Wilayat Tarabulus*, the group's "province" in northwest Libya.<sup>74</sup> This entreaty was affirmed by then leader Qahtani, who in September 2015 summoned foreign fighters to join the group: "We call you, our brothers, to perform your *hijra* [immigration] for God and in support of His religion. Your path will be disturbed by difficulties and great obstacles. The actions are but by intention and comfort is not achieved by comfort."<sup>75</sup>

Additionally, in line with its precedent set in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State began releasing video messages by foreign fighters in Libya encouraging others to migrate to the front. For example, in IS in Libya's first video, released January 20, 2015, two Tuareg members called for individuals in Azawad (as northern Mali is known by some locals) to pledge *baya* to Baghdadi and make *hijra* to IS in Libya. One of the men, Abu Umar al-Tawrigi, stated: "I call my Tuareg brothers to migrate to the Islamic State and that they give *baya* to

*emir al-mu'minin* [leader of the faithful] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>76</sup> This trend would continue until 2016, when the Islamic State's capabilities were degraded by al-Bunyan al-Marsus (see Table 2).

**TUNISIAN FIGHTERS.** The Tunisians among this foreign contingent, the largest national cohort by far, as already noted, had a special status given their origins next door. This in part explains why Tunisian jihadists had their own base in Sabratha, Libya, about sixty-five miles east of the Tunisian border. Therefore, in addition to assisting in the caliphate project and combating its

enemies in Libya, Tunisian foreign fighters in particular sought to attract others to be trained for attacks back home. Thus, in a video message from April 7, 2015, individuals including Abu Yahya al-Tunisi urged Tunisians to join them in Libya, so that the newcomers could be trained to eventually extend the IS writ to Tunisia.<sup>77</sup> It is likewise no surprise that according to Tunisian judicial records, as reported by the Tunisian Center for Research and Studies on Terrorism, 70 percent of all Tunisians arrested for jihadist-related cases trained in Libya.<sup>78</sup>

Further, all major IS-related terrorist and insurgent incidents in Tunisia were planned in Sabratha. Accord-

Table 2. Foreign Fighters Featured in IS Libya Videos

DATE	NAME OF INDIVIDUAL	ORIGIN	VIDEO TITLE*
01-20-15	Abu Umar al-Tawrigi Abu Sulayman al-Tawrigi	Mali	<i>Message to Our Brothers the Monotheists</i>
02-27-15	Abu Ali al-Jazrawi	Saudi Arabia	<i>Message to the Brothers of Tawhid</i>
03-05-15	Abu Abdul Rahman al-Masri	Egypt	<i>Epic Battles of the Caliphate in Benghazi: Message to the Soldiers of the Tyrant #2</i>
04-05-15	Abu Musab al-Muhajir	Unknown	<i>Epic Battles of the Caliphate in Benghazi: Martyrdom Operation Targeting a Group of Apostates in Benghazi</i>
04-07-15	Abu Yahya al-Tunisi	Tunisia	<i>Message to Our Brothers in Tunisia</i>
05-05-15	Abu Ahmad al-Masri	Egypt	<i>Benghazi: The Meaning of Stability</i>
06-11-15	Abu Dujana al-Sudani	Sudan	<i>Raid of Abu Ibrahim al-Misrati</i>
07-11-15	Abu Sulayman al-Sudani	Sudan	<i>Patience Awakening of Darnah: But We Have Come for Your Slaughter</i>
07-30-15	Abu al-Bara al-Tunisi Abu Hamza al-Masri	Tunisia Egypt	<i>Messages from Sirte</i>
09-25-15	Abu Muthana al-Sudani	Sudan	<i>Messages from Those on the Frontlines upon the Fortified Strongholds of the Caliphate in Benghazi</i>
09-29-15	Abu Talha al-Sudani Harun al-Maghrebi Abu Abdullah al-Sudani Shaykaw al-Tunisi	Sudan Morocco Sudan Tunisia	<i>Support of the Captives</i>
11-08-15	Abu Omar al-Maghrebi	Morocco	<i>Message to the Medical Professionals</i>
01-12-16	Saif al-Din al-Somali Abu Qudama al-Somali	Somalia Somalia	<i>Message to Our Brothers in Somalia</i>
01-16-16	Abu al-Yaqin al-Tunisi	Tunisia	<i>Benghazi: The Meaning of Stability #2</i>
02-07-16	Abu Usayd al-Masri Abu Malik al-Masri	Egypt Egypt	<i>Whose Peaceful Religion?</i>
02-27-16	Abu Julaybib al-Eritri	Eritrea	<i>Take [Oh, Muhammad] from Their Wealth a Charity</i>
03-30-16	Talha al-Nigeri Waqas al-Somali	Niger Somalia	<i>To Establish the Religion</i>
05-07-16	Abu Abdullah al-Masri	Egypt	<i>And the [Best] Outcome Is for the Righteous</i>
05-18-16	Abu Muaz al-Sudani Abu Yahya al-Sudani Abu Musa al-Tunisi Abu Musab al-Sudani Abu Dujana al-Sudani	Sudan Sudan Tunisia Sudan Sudan	<i>And That He Will Surely Establish for Them [Therein] Their Religion</i>
05-29-16	Abu Omar al-Mali Abu Adam al-Nigeri Abu Abdullah al-Ghani Abu Shuaib al-Singhali Khabab al-Tunisi	Mali Niger Ghana Senegal Tunisia	<i>From Humiliation to Glory</i>
07-26-16	Abu Lubaba al-Sudani	Sudan	<i>This Is What God and His Messenger Had Promised Us</i>

ing to the testimony of Tunisian foreign fighter Muhammad bin Muhsin al-Gharbi (aka Abu Zaid), who was arrested by the Tripoli-based RADA Special Deterrence Forces, training took place in the city's al-Dabashi neighborhood.<sup>79</sup> The brain trust charged with plotting such activities included Tunisian IS members Moez Fezzani, Noureddine Chouchane, Miftah Manita, Adel Gandhri, and Choukri Abdelkaoui. In particular, Fezzani and Chouchane were instrumental in planning two major attacks:<sup>80</sup> the strike on the Bardo National Museum in Tunis on March 15, 2015, in which IS operatives Yasmine Labidi and Jaber Khachnaoui killed twenty tourists and two Tunisians while injuring fifty others; and the Sousse mass shooting on June 26, 2015, when a lone gunman, Seifeddine Rezgui Yacoubi, killed thirty-eight and injured thirty-nine beachgoers at the Riu Imperial Marhaba hotel.<sup>81</sup>

**ATTEMPTED BEN GARDANE TAKEOVER.** Lastly, in early March 2016, IS attempted to conquer the Tunisian border town of Ben Gardane, as well as some smaller villages in the surrounding area.<sup>82</sup> The purpose was to extend its reach across the border so that it could, as in Iraq and Syria, claim to have ruptured yet another international boundary. According to a Tunisian journalist, Naji al-Zairi, the planning for this takeover allegedly began in late December 2015<sup>83</sup> and is believed to have occurred largely at Ghandri's house in Sabratha.<sup>84</sup> Manita was to be the proto-province's leader, Abdelkaoui its sharia judge, and Gandhri its treasurer.<sup>85</sup>

On the day of the attack, March 7, IS activated sleeper cells, while other cells crossed the border from Libya and began an assault on the gendarmerie and army barracks in Ben Gardane. A group also took to loudspeakers to explain the situation to local residents.<sup>86</sup> According to a witness, the spokespeople said, "Don't worry. We are the Islamic State. We are here to protect you from this non-believer government."<sup>87</sup> In addition, IS fighters created a checkpoint, at which they questioned drivers and examined their identify cards, even killing an individual identified as a customs official at one such stop.<sup>88</sup>

Despite painstaking planning, the attempted conquest failed owing to resistance from locals. This pushback likewise legitimized a sweep by the Tunisian military, during which it sought to kill or banish remaining IS elements from the city. Allegedly, residents even began throwing stones at IS fighters.<sup>89</sup> Such develop-

ments shocked the IS leadership, given the infamy of Ben Gardane in previously furnishing the group and its predecessors with foreign fighters. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the late leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, who died in 2006, even supposedly stated that "if Ben Gardane had been located next to Fallujah, we would have liberated Iraq." In the end, the failed takeover only further degraded the Islamic State network in Tunisia as well as its support command in Libya. Instead of leading a new "province," Manita and Chouchane were now allegedly dead, Abdelkaoui and Fezzani were arrested, and Gandhri was on the run.

### **AFRICAN FIGHTERS—AND THE PARTICULAR THREAT FROM SUDAN.**

Alongside Tunisians, fighters from diverse nationalities joined the jihadist insurgency in Libya after IS publicly sought such support in 2014. Whereas previously jihadists in Libya had come from neighboring countries, now they traveled from East and West Africa, areas without a prolific history of foreign fighting beyond participation in nearby campaigns in places like Somalia, Mali, or Nigeria. Now, however, IS in Libya could count among its ranks recruits from Burundi, Chad, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Niger, Senegal, and Sudan, as well as Somalia, Mali, and Nigeria. For the countries of origin—not only for Libya—the potential consequences are clear: returning foreign fighters who could bolster already simmering insurgencies, while building up recruitment and homegrown networks in countries without much history of jihadist activism. In many ways, the situation can be compared to that of European Muslims who went to Bosnia in the mid-1990s, thereby helping seed the next generation of jihadists in their particular home countries. Today, the challenge of addressing these returnees in Africa and elsewhere may not be extremely urgent, but if officials ignore the situation and allow enough space for jihadist activism, more-serious threats could emerge in the middle to long term, after the initial mobilization to Libya is effectively forgotten.

The threat may well be more immediate in one country, Sudan, which has both its own history of robust jihadism as well as numerous and high-level representation within IS in Libya. Some to enlist with IS previously belonged to the radical Sudanese Salafi group Ansar al-Sunnah.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, two sons of the Ansar al-Sunnah leader, Abu Zaid Muhammad Hamzah, were killed while fighting with IS in Libya.<sup>91</sup> Abu Zaid's third son, Abdul

Raouf, had already been sentenced to death after taking part in the murder of John Granville, who worked for the U.S. Agency for International Development, and his driver, Abdul Rahman Abbas, as they returned from a New Year's Eve celebration in Khartoum in 2008.<sup>92</sup> Two of Abdul Raouf's coconspirators signed on with IS in Libya after being released from prison, having served their respective sentences, in April 2016.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, two Sudanese jihadist leaders, Masaad al-Sidairah and Sulayman Uthman Abu Naru, pledged *baya* to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi after the caliphate announcement and worked to encourage and recruit individuals to join IS.<sup>94</sup> This overall portrait shows how Sudanese IS operatives and potentially Ansar al-Sunnah could be a conduit for recruitment.

Elsewhere, IS sought to use its recruitment successes to project power in Africa, especially in Nigeria and Somalia. In the former case, Tunisian members of IS in Libya who were associated with the auxiliary media account Ifriqiya Media helped facilitate the *baya* of Boko Haram leader Abubakr al-Shekau to Baghdadi in part through the creation of a Nigerian jihadist media outlet called al-Urwah al-Wuthqa.<sup>95</sup> This development helped professionalize operations from Boko Haram and, after it became Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiya, or IS West Africa "province," allowed it to be subsumed more easily by the IS media system.<sup>96</sup> As for Somalia, reports suggest that Somali foreign fighters in Libya were seeking to gain skills for use in Puntland, the home region where the Islamic State is strongest.<sup>97</sup> These efforts fell short, though, in part because members of Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahedin (aka al-Shabab), al-Qaeda's Somali branch, killed many defectors to IS and returnees from Libya alike. This probably explains why IS has yet to give official province status to its Somalia branch.

**FEMALE FIGHTERS.** The involvement of women represents another notable trend with the Islamic State, including in Libya. In addition to looking at the overall numbers, one can ask pertinent questions such as whether these women joined of their own volition or went with their husbands. The number of babies born to the spouses of foreign fighters also helps fill out the story. Strikingly, no evidence exists of foreign women joining the jihad in Libya before spring 2014. The phenomenon appears to have spiked as IS grew stronger in Darnah and later in Sirte. Simultaneously, an even higher number of foreign women have joined jihadist

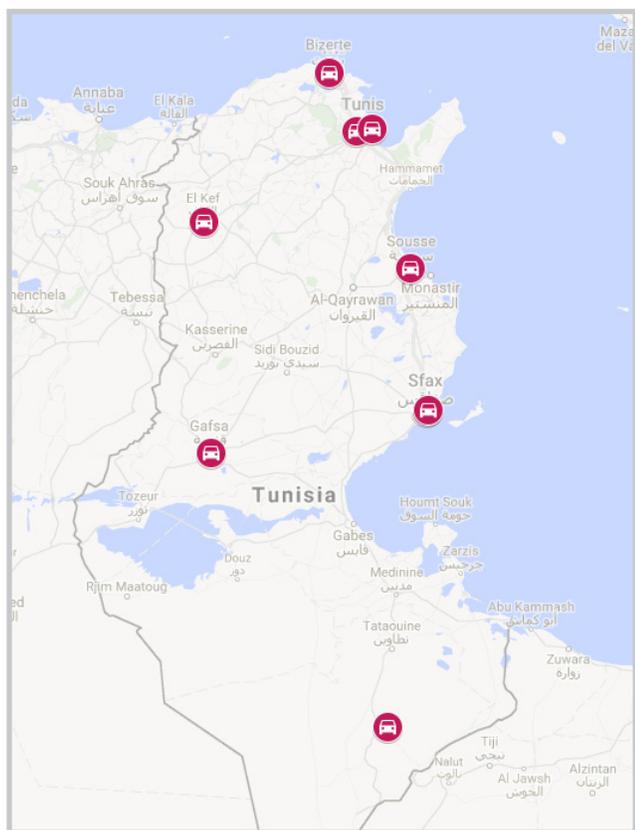
groups in Syria since IS declared its caliphate. Therefore, the mobilization in Libya appears to be part of a broader trend, likely enhanced by caliphate-building messaging, which goes beyond recruiting individuals to fight to include creating a society, community, and functioning state.

As for the numbers, Tunisian researcher Badra Gaaloul estimates that 1,000 women are affiliated with IS in Libya, including Libyans. Of women from abroad, the largest number, 300, again comes from Tunisia.<sup>98</sup> Other women, meanwhile, have been identified from Australia, Chad, Belgium, Egypt, Eritrea, France, Kenya, Morocco, Niger, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Britain.<sup>99</sup>

The sheer number of Tunisian women recruits to IS allows for their areas of origin to be identified, based on arrests of those thwarted from joining and arrests in Sirte during the anti-IS military campaign (see Map 1). Unsurprisingly, reflecting the broader trend in Tunisian foreign fighter mobilization, Tunisian women come from a variety of locales, including coastal areas such as Bizerte, Sousse, Sfax, and Tunis neighborhoods, as well as inland areas including El Kef, Gafsa, and Remada.<sup>100</sup> The last of these has been a hotbed of overall recruitment to IS in Libya, as discussed later in more detail.

The best known of these women foreign fighters are the sisters Gofrane and Rahma al-Chikhaoui, both in their late teens when they joined. Originally from the impoverished Tunis neighborhood of Ettadhamen, they were recruited to the Salafi-jihadist milieu through AST at its *dawa* tents and mosques in Sousse. A few years later, in September 2014, the sisters decided to join IS in Libya.<sup>101</sup> Gofrane is currently raising a toddler, while Rahma married the earlier-noted senior IS leader Noureddine Chouchane,<sup>102</sup> who was subsequently killed in a U.S. airstrike in February 2016.

For the most part, women on the Libyan and Syrian fronts played similar roles: as marriage bait and thus to perform wifely duties—namely, supporting one's "mujahid" husband, bearing as many children as possible, and raising the next generation of so-called mujahedin. Such an outcome must have disappointed some, including those encountered by a Kenyan woman named Fatima who herself journeyed northward to join IS in Libya. The women she met along the way—fellow Kenyans as well as Eritreans and Somalis—on a route that led from Nairobi through Kampala, Uganda, to South Sudan and Sudan were lured by the promise



Map 1. Known Hometowns of Tunisian Female Foreign Fighters

of better economic conditions or the desire to fulfill a perceived religious obligation.<sup>103</sup> That said, some from the West, in particular Britain—e.g., Umm Asiyah, Umm Musab, and Umm Unknown<sup>104</sup>—were involved in unofficial propaganda and recruitment of other women to the Islamic State’s territory in Libya.<sup>105</sup> Umm Musab had been there as early as May 2015.

Women have had certain limited opportunities, such as service in the al-Khansa Brigade, which was established first in Syria and later in Libya, when Umm Rayan, a Tunisian woman in her late forties, traveled from Raqqa to Sirte.<sup>106</sup> Having helped establish the brigade in Raqqa in February 2014,<sup>107</sup> Umm Rayan set about, upon arriving in Libya, facilitating training for IS-affiliated women not only in *hisba* (moral policing) patrols but allegedly even as fighters. Rahma Chikhaoui, the Tunisian foreign fighter mentioned earlier, claims that potential women fighters receive weapons training for three weeks, with many among them allegedly also trained to become suicide bombers.<sup>108</sup> Still, no evidence thus far suggests that any women has conducted a suicide attack on behalf of IS in Libya. The weapons train-

ing, for its part, seems more plausible. According to an account from Umm Omar al-Tunisi (Zainab), originally from Sfax, sometime after arriving in Libya through the Islamic State’s facilitation network, she began training in a beach area. As part of the training, she learned how to use an AK-47 and noted that the women involved could choose other weapons on which to be trained, including rocket-propelled grenades, PKT machine guns, and DShK machine guns. Moreover, Umm Omar explained that IS gave every woman her own explosive belt.<sup>109</sup> Given the endorsement of women fighting in the October 5, 2017, issue of the IS newsletter *al-Naba*, women could eventually be elevated as fighters in the country amid attempts to reemerge militarily.<sup>110</sup>

**IS AFTER SIRTE.** Since the Islamic State was kicked out of Sirte in December 2016, the group has released little information about its foreign fighters, in part because many were killed in the related battles. According to the Libyan Attorney General’s Office and al-Bunyan al-Marsus, hundreds of foreign IS members died during the recapture of Sirte, with hundreds either buried in the rubble or recovered dead and thereafter held in refrigerators in Misrata, awaiting repatriation agreements with their home nations.<sup>111</sup> Many women of IS fighters and their children have already been transferred back to their home nations, especially in the case of Sudan,<sup>112</sup> with the process for Egypt and Tunisia also now under way.<sup>113</sup>

Despite the losses and transfers, foreign fighters undoubtedly remain a factor within IS as it seeks to resume military activity. For instance, on October 4, 2017, an IS attack in Misrata was conducted by two foreign fighters, Abu al-Bara al-Muhajir and Abu Jaafar al-Tunisi.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, for the first time since mid-April 2017, Tunisian authorities on October 11, 2017, arrested one member of a four-person cell attempting to go fight in Libya.<sup>115</sup> Whatever erosion has occurred for the Islamic State’s foreign fighter network, an examination of the routes that allowed so many to enlist for the Libya campaign holds much value, since future jihadists are likely to exploit the same avenues.

## Foreign Fighter Network Routes to Libya

In piecing together the routes taken by foreign jihadist fighters to Libya, the following section relies on data from news sources from individuals’ country of origin as

well as recent information released by the Libyan Attorney General's Office. This data allows for a fairly thorough assessment of the movement of foreign fighters into Libya, including starting points, local details beyond simply national portraits, and other nodes and areas of connection.

In many senses, the routes, especially from farther south on the African continent, resemble those taken by migrants traveling for Europe in search of greater economic opportunity. For their part, jihadists, having already exploited these routes to traffic in weapons and drugs,<sup>116</sup> could now use their enhanced knowledge to recruit individuals into their organizations, whether for local actions or potential external operations in Europe, or to amass revenue through extortion or kidnapping for ransom. As indicated by judicial investigations concentrating on Kenya, IS networks recruiting in East Africa have relied on a human trafficking ring called the "Magafe network."<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, Italian interior minister Marco Minniti believes that the use by foreign fighters of migrant boats to infiltrate Italy and Europe represents a concrete threat.<sup>118</sup> As a result, the movement of individuals from East and West Africa could draw escalating security attention in the coming years, especially if a related attack were to occur in a country like Italy.

Some of the networks exploited by IS were already being utilized by Ansar al-Sharia in both Libya and Tunisia. AST had deep connections to the trafficking of weapons between Libya and Tunisia, while ASL had connections to human smuggling from Sudan to Libya.<sup>119</sup> Both groups masked these activities through their *dawa* and social service campaigns, with AST helping manage the Libyan refugee flows near the Ras al-Jadir border crossing in 2011 and ASL providing services in the aftermath of floods in Sudan in 2013.<sup>120</sup> Similarly, according to the NGO Transparency International, following the rise of IS, Egyptian recruits would bribe low-ranking Egyptian military officers on the Egypt-Libya border to move individuals and traffic weapons.<sup>121</sup> Such findings illustrate the likely role of corruption in this type of movement, not only in Egypt but in other countries as well.

The recent investigation by the Libyan Attorney General's Office sheds official light on some of the movement by foreign fighters who joined IS. In particular, it discloses routes taken by individuals from Algeria, Egypt, Eritrea, Mali, Niger, Senegal Sudan, and Tunisia (see Map 2).

Despite the apparent comprehensiveness of this portrait, it still provides only a limited view, both omitting certain routes and constraining its scope to those foreign fighters who sought to join the Islamic State. It thus also covers a limited time period, from 2014 to 2016, and does not include foreign fighters aspiring to join other groups. Map 3 attempts to fill these gaps, encompassing the full breadth of the foreign fighter phenomenon and routes to all jihadist groups in Libya from 2011 until 2017. This map nevertheless also likely has holes, given its reliance on open-source information that could not be confirmed fully. That said, it still likely represents the most robust way of capturing the broader phenomenon.

Some of the key nodes through which individuals travel to get to Libya include Agadez, Algiers, Bamako, Ben Gardane, Cairo, Casablanca, Khartoum, Nouakchott (Mauritania), Tamanrasset (Algeria), Tataouine (Tunisia), and Tunis. Within Libya, the key hubs for moving people from border areas to the three main jihadist hotspots—Benghazi, Darnah, and Sirte—include Ajdabiya, al-Nawfaliyah, Awbari, Bani Waled, Ghadames, Ghat, Kufra, Sabha, Sabratha, Tazirbu, and Tiji. This suggests not only the work being done outside Libya by a vast network of facilitators and logisticians on behalf of jihadist groups, most notably IS, but also the strong domestic infrastructure of safe houses and safe routes facilitating passage for individuals to their desired organizations.

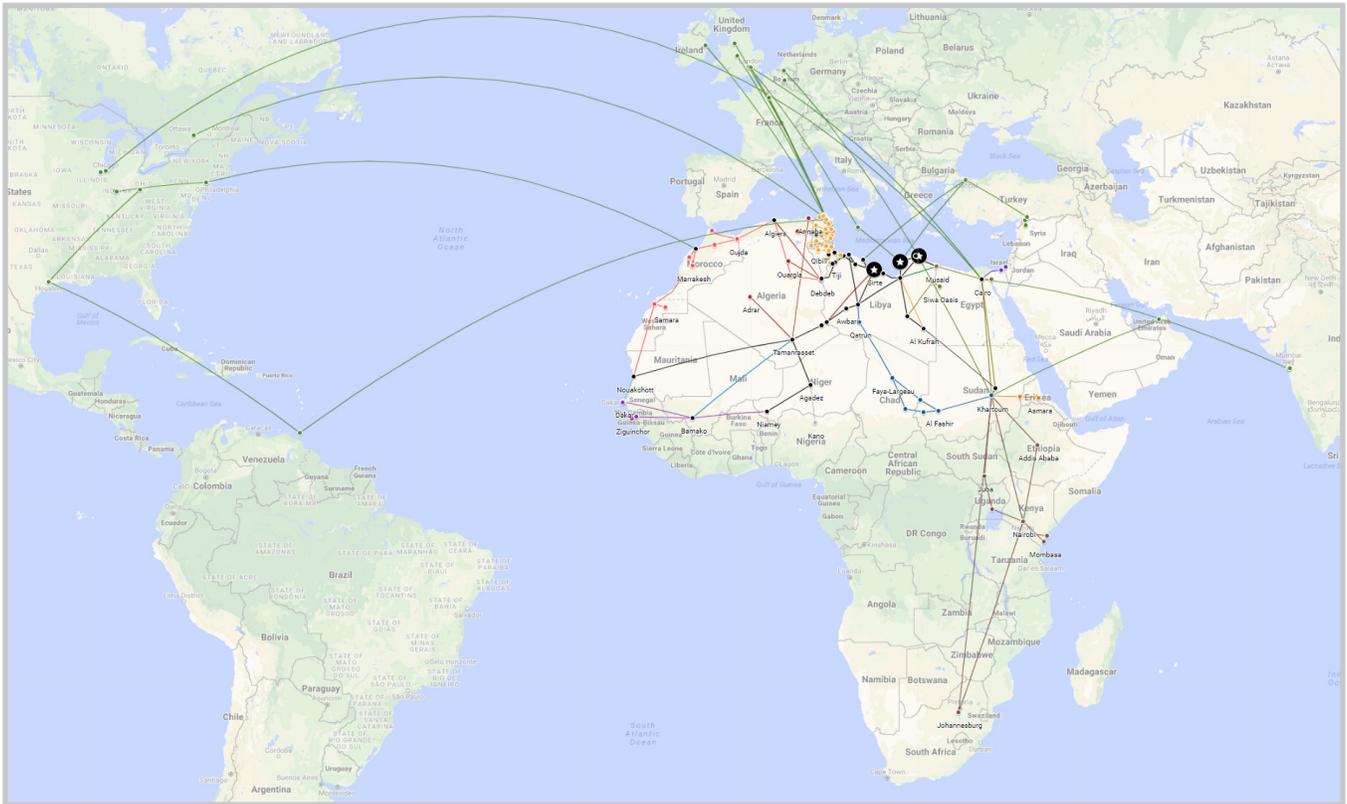
A deeper look at the data offers further insights on specific recruitment milieus. In some cases, for instance, aspiring jihadists had been living mainly in capitals or major cities: the vast majority of Sudanese to join IS were from Khartoum, most Senegalese came from Dakar, and Kenyans traveled from Nairobi and Mombasa. For these contexts, the suggestion is then that foreign fighter jihadism is mainly an urban phenomenon that hasn't spread significantly to rural locales. The return of fighters to their home countries, however, suggests this calculus could change through recruitment in the hinterlands.

In Tunisia, by contrast, the phenomenon is very much a national one, with at least thirty-three cities and towns represented among individuals who traveled to or attempted to join jihadist groups in Libya. Such a finding tracks with findings by this author on the wide reach of domestic Tunisian jihadism as well as the array of locations represented among Tunisian jihadists in Syria (see Map 4).



Map 2. Foreign Fighter Routes to Sirte. Source: “Musarat al-Hijrah,” Media Center of al-Bunyan al-Marsus Operation, September 28, 2017, [https://t.me/media\\_center\\_vs\\_is](https://t.me/media_center_vs_is).

- ALGERIA
  - Annaba–Tamanrasset–Djanet–Ghat (Libya)–Sirte
  - Algiers–Debdeb–Ghadames (Libya)–Tiji–Sabratha–Bani Walid–Sirte
- EGYPT
  - Cairo–Khartoum (Sudan)–al-Jouref–Kufra (Libya)–Tazirbu–Ajdabiya–al-Nawfaliyah–Sirte
  - Cairo–al-Jouref (Sudan)–Kufra (Libya)–Tazirbu–Ajdabiya–al-Nawfaliyah–Sirte
  - Cairo–Musaïd (Libya)–Ajdabiya–al-Nawfaliyah–Sirte
  - Siwa–al-Jaghub–Tazirbu (Libya)–Ajdabiya–al-Nawfaliyah–Sirte
- ERITREA
  - Asmara–Kassala (Sudan)–Khartoum–al-Jouref–Kufra (Libya)–Ajdabiya–al-Nawfaliyah–Sirte
- MALI
  - Bamako–Tamanrasset (Algeria)–Djanet–Ghat (Libya)–Awbari–Sabha–Tripoli–Bani Walid–
- NIGER
  - Agadez–Tamanrasset (Algeria)–Djanet–Ghat (Libya)–Awbari–Sabha–Tripoli–Bani Walid–Sirte
- SENEGAL
  - Dakar–Bamako (Mali)–Niamey (Niger)–Agadez–Tamanrasset (Algeria)–Djanet–Ghat (Libya)–Awbari–Sabha–Tripoli–Bani Walid–Sirte
- SUDAN
  - Khartoum–al-Fashir–Saraf Omrah–Abéché (Chad)–Faya-Largeau–Qatron (Libya)–Sabha–Sirte
  - Khartoum–al-Fashir–Tini–Faya-Largeau (Chad)–Qatron (Libya)–Sabha–Sirte
- TUNISIA
  - Tunis–Sousse–Ben Gardane–Sabratha (Libya)–Bani Walid–Sirte
  - Tunis–Sousse–Ben Gardane–Sabratha (Libya)–Tripoli–Bani Walid–Sirte
- COMMON ROUTE FROM MORE THAN ONE COUNTRY



Map 3. Overall Foreign Fighter Routes to Libya, 2011–17. [CLICK MAP TO ENTER INTERACTIVE ONLINE VERSION.](#)



Map 4. Tunisian Foreign Fighter Mobilization to Libya, 2011–17. [CLICK MAP TO VIEW FULL ONLINE VERSION.](#)

For the foreign fighter mobilization to Libya, the largest numbers have come from the traditional recruitment hotspots of Ben Gardane, Bizerte, and Tunis. In this particular mobilization, the small southeast Tunisian desert town of Remada has also seen an outsize number of foreign fighters go to Libya—upward of 90 individuals out of a total population of 11,000.<sup>122</sup> Certain factors help explain this apparent anomaly: (1) massive underdevelopment and underemployment; (2) attempts by the Tunisian military beginning in February 2016 to block the Dehiba-Wazin border crossing, which hindered even meager salaries through black-market trade and is believed to have exacerbated corruption;<sup>123</sup> and (3) “extreme religiosity”<sup>124</sup> among those who joined IS, according to local sources, suggesting the role played by ideology. Both Remada and Ben Gardane, given the latter’s history of militancy, are worth following should IS ever again attempt to take territory spanning the Libya-Tunisia border. Such an IS effort could result in quickly consolidated control over a large frontier area, as happened in Iraq and Syria in 2014.

Another future possibility, not necessarily specific to the Libyan mobilization, involves the route the American Aaron Daniels intended to take from Columbus, Ohio, to Libya to join IS. Daniels was arrested by the FBI before he could actualize his plans, but his path would have taken him from Columbus to Houston to Trinidad and Tobago and thereafter Tunis, and finally into Libya.<sup>125</sup> What is noteworthy is the Trinidad and Tobago component, in light of the unprecedented mobilization of residents from this Caribbean island country to fight with IS in Iraq and Syria.<sup>126</sup> Therefore, it would be significant should returnees establish a facilitation and logistics hub for prospective foreign fighters from North and South America for any given jihadist theater abroad. A smart tactic, for example, could entail using a beach vacation as a diversionary route to travel to a future war zone with either IS or al-Qaeda.

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### **External Operations, Returnees, and the Future**

A final risk to Africa and Europe related to Islamic State foreign fighters in Libya involves the possibility of external operations by returnees or operatives through “remote-controlled” plotting. Having already reviewed cases of external operations planned both by AST/ASL and the Islamic State in Tunisia, along with future chal-

lenges tied to the large number of Tunisian foreign fighters in Libya, this paper will now look into plots, attacks, and possible future scenarios based on precedents set in Africa and Europe.

In the strategic work “Libya: The Strategic Gateway for the Islamic State,” written in January 2015 by a little-known IS in Libya member, Abu Irhim al-Libi, the author reflects that “Libya looks upon the sea, the desert, mountains, and six states: Egypt, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Algeria and Tunisia...It is the anchor from which Africa and the Islamic Maghreb can be reached.”<sup>127</sup> Furthermore, he plays upon European fears of jihadism, writing as follows: “Add to this the fact that it has a long coastline and looks upon the southern Crusader states, which can be reached with ease by even a rudimentary boat...It is even possible that there could be a closure of shipping lanes because of the targeting of Crusader ships and tankers.”<sup>128</sup> The latter has yet to occur, but, as noted, Italian officials are keenly worried about IS operatives infiltrating migrant flows into Italy and Europe more generally, a goal IS has already achieved by infiltrating with Syrian refugees traveling from Turkey into Greece and beyond.

Although IS exploitation of refugee flows for external operations has drawn more attention in the Syrian than the Libyan context, one should remember that many key figures involved in the major 2015–16 attacks in Belgium and France had previously trained with Katibat al-Battar al-Libiyah while still based in Syria.<sup>129</sup> A good number of these members have since returned to Libya, suggesting the potential for sophisticated know-how on the ground. Still, as yet, no known cases have emerged wherein IS in Libya engaged in full command-and-control over an attack or plot.<sup>130</sup>

Allegations of involvement, however, have touched Moez Fezzani, a previously mentioned Tunisian IS leader in Sabratha who is reported to have had contact with a cell in Milan.<sup>131</sup> Nothing more came of these hints, possibly in part because Fezzani was arrested by Tunisian security forces in the failed IS attempt to take Ben Gardane in March 2016.

More notable still are IS in Libya’s connections to the December 2016 Berlin Christmas Market attack and the May 2017 Manchester Arena bombing. For the former, based on available information, Anis Amri, the perpetrator of Tunisian nationality, alongside his connections to extremists in Germany,<sup>132</sup> was involved in what can be described as a remote-controlled attack, meaning

he was guided via encrypted messaging from IS members—in this case, from Libya. According to the North Rhine–Westphalian State Office of Criminal Investigation, Amri had been in contact with two Tunisian IS members in Libya on the encrypted-messaging application Telegram since February 2016.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, a month after the attack, the U.S. military conducted an airstrike on an IS training camp and base twenty-eight miles southwest of Sirte, claiming it was in response to security threats emanating from the group against European allies.<sup>134</sup> Yet U.S. officials and Libyan intelligence also suggest that the IS members in touch with Amri were based at this location, perhaps hinting at why U.S. forces chose the target in retaliation.<sup>135</sup>

The Manchester Arena case involved a lengthy gestation period from involvement to exposure to militancy and action. The larger context here was the return of Libyan expatriates and former LIFG members from Britain to take part in the fight against the Qadhafi regime. One such returnee was the imam of the Didsbury Mosque, attended by Salman Abedi, the perpetrator of the Manchester Arena attack.<sup>136</sup> Abedi's father, Ramadan, a former member of the LIFG, also returned to Libya to fight in the revolution.<sup>137</sup> While visiting his father, the sixteen-year-old Salman engaged in fighting and gained exposure to the jihadist milieu. Like many of his peers, though, Salman would reject the jihadism of his father's generation in favor of IS-styled jihadism.

According to Salman's brother Hashem, who was arrested by the Tripoli-based RADA Special Forces after the attack based on his involvement in its planning, the brothers became sympathetic to the Islamic State through their network of friends, a number of whom joined IS in Syria, as well as through online jihadist propaganda.<sup>138</sup> In the year or so leading up to the attack, Salman met, while in Libya, with IS operatives who had previously been part of *Katibat al-Battar al-Libiyah* in Tripoli and Sabratha, in the estimation of intelligence officials.<sup>139</sup> Therefore, despite the lack of direct confirmation that he underwent training while in Libya, Raffaello Pantucci suggests that his determination to build the bomb immediately on his return to Manchester suggests receipt of some training during his final trip to Libya.<sup>140</sup> As a result, based on currently available information, this attack can best be described as the result of training with midlevel operatives.

Just as Europeans first became involved, on a large scale, with the transnational jihadist movement during

the 1990s in Bosnia, the mobilization to Libya represents the first such case for sub-Saharan Africans. Worth noting here, of course, is that while Muslims were a minority in European states, they constitute a majority in many of the states from which jihadists flowed to Libya, perhaps reducing the likelihood that wider extremist movements could flourish based on inherent minority grievances. Still, countries in which a Muslim minority does exist, such as Ghana, Kenya, and, to a lesser extent, Eritrea, could be riper for such jihadism and therefore worth watching. In Eritrea, particularly, authoritarianism might narrow the overall space for jihadist proselytizing and recruitment, while the democratic character of Ghana and Kenya could make such efforts more feasible. Further, Ghana has no history of jihadist activism, whereas Kenya has faced problems with recruitment of Kenyans and attacks by the Somalia-based *al-Shabab*.<sup>141</sup>

Some African countries have already taken steps to preemptively defend against blowback, whether or not they expect jihadist returnees from Libya. Such measures are likely driven in part by fears related to disruption caused by major AQIM attacks in Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, and Mali in recent years. Thus, in early January 2017, Chad closed its border with Libya to protect against foreign fighters fleeing into the country after the Islamic State's ouster from Sirte.<sup>142</sup> More generally, countries like Benin and Gabon are aiming to increase their security as well as their counterterrorism infrastructure.<sup>143</sup> As Gabonese president Ali Bongo Ondimba noted in May 2016, "Most of us [West Africans] do not have the experience to fight terrorism. It's new to us."<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, in the aftermath of the Libyan Attorney General's report on foreign fighters, majority and minority parties in the Ghanaian government have joined together to intensify monitoring of internal security as well as build closer ties to Libya, with the latter initiative aimed at ascertaining information on the 50–100 of its citizens who joined IS in Libya.<sup>145</sup>

In limited cases, jihadist suspects have been arrested or killed in places with virtually no history of militancy. For example, in mid-January 2016, two AQIM-linked individuals from Guinea-Bissau, along with a senior AQIM cleric from Mauritania, were arrested in Boké, a city in the western part of Guinea.<sup>146</sup> On the other side of the continent, in Rwanda, in late January 2016, police shot Muhammad Mugemangango, the deputy imam at Kigali's Kimironko Mosque, who served as an IS recruiter for Iraq and Syria, while also arresting some

of the individuals Mugemangango had recruited, who were planning to join IS in Libya.<sup>147</sup> The peril associated with these outliers need not be blown out of proportion, but instead taken to illustrate the future risk of exploitation of countries lacking a history of jihadist activism. They also represent potential sites for casing new targets with the goal of expanding the jihadist area of operations, as AQIM has done in the past few years. Likewise, the Islamic State's unofficial affiliate in the Sahara region, which is led by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi and based mainly in Mali and Niger, could take advantage of these situations.

Furthermore, the Islamic State is innovative and is still looking for ways to exploit various weaknesses. For example, recent warnings by officials in both Morocco and Nigeria reflected worry that IS could exploit migrants stuck in Libya who are in the process of being repatriated to their respective home countries. This has postponed the return of Moroccans, given that Morocco's security services, in coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, identify such individuals and whether they should be deemed a threat.<sup>148</sup> Similarly, Dr. Ona Ekhomu, president of the Association of Industrial Security and Safety Operators of Nigeria, advised the Nigerian government that "some of these people might have pledged [allegiance] to ISIS. They need to be separated out from those who migrated for economic reasons."<sup>149</sup>

## THE EXAMPLE OF SENEGAL

One West African country that could be strongly affected by returning foreign fighters or AQIM's regional ambitions is Senegal.<sup>150</sup> Since late 2015, Senegal has seen more cases of individuals being arrested for connections to either Boko Haram, AQIM, or IS. For instance, in November 2015, a number of individuals were arrested for helping finance Boko Haram.<sup>151</sup> Later, in February 2016, Senegal arrested four religious leaders whom it believed had connections to Boko Haram.<sup>152</sup> More recently, in early April 2017, a Nigerian member of Boko Haram who had traveled from Mauritania was arrested while attempting to recruit individuals to join the jihadist group in a Dakar suburb.<sup>153</sup>

In response to such developments at home, as well as nearby countries, Senegal has taken preventive action. For example, after AQIM bombed the Splendid Hotel in Burkina Faso on January 15, 2016, the Senegalese government arrested 500 individuals and questioned 900 overall in seeking to stave off any such

attack in Dakar.<sup>154</sup> Furthermore, in late February 2017, Senegal arrested two Malian individuals suspected of being involved in the AQIM attack on the Grand-Bassam Hotel in Cote d'Ivoire on March 13, 2016.<sup>155</sup>

As for the Islamic State, Senegal arrested two Moroccans, two Algerians, and a Tuareg for ties to the group in mid-April 2017, early October 2017, and late October 2017, respectively.<sup>156</sup> The Moroccans had recently arrived from Istanbul and the Tuareg had just returned from Syria,<sup>157</sup> suggesting long routes home or hopes to build up local networks and facilitation/logistics hubs. In response, Senegal has taken steps to improve its internal and border security, including beefing up patrols along its borders with Mali and Mauritania as well as constructing new border posts with cooperation from the European Union.<sup>158</sup> So far, these proactive measures are helping thwart the creation of new networks as well as consequent attacks, although time will ultimately be the judge of their sustainability. Such moves are especially relevant in light of Senegalese press reports that AQIM's front group Ansar al-Din planned attacks in Senegal—as well as Gambia—on its independence day, April 4, 2017, even as the plans failed.<sup>159</sup> There could also be heightened possibilities that Senegal might be targeted in the future by AQIM after the country announced last week that it would assist Mali in pacifying militants from Mopti, in central Mali, with 200 troops.<sup>160</sup>

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## Conclusion

In discussing the foreign fighter mobilization to Libya, this paper has covered a range of topics, including statistics on those who joined or attempted to join jihadist groups since the country's revolution began in 2011, a broader history of foreign fighting in Libya since 2011, networks and routes centering on the Libyan jihad, and, finally, external operations and potential future trajectories for foreign fighter returnees. The paper also closely examined jihadist events since the Islamic State declared its presence in Libya in spring 2014. All such material illustrates major complexities and overlapping dynamics that have evolved since the start of the Libyan revolution. Indeed, the biggest takeaway involves the potential for future growth in jihadist activism within Africa, whether exploited by IS and its front groups or AQIM and its front groups or, to a lesser extent, by Boko Haram.

Such threats indicate the rising importance of cooperation between nations from Europe and Africa. Moreover, intelligence and information sharing among African nations will better help track the movement of individuals throughout the northern, western, and eastern sectors of the continent. One such vehicle for intra-African cooperation, although it thus far focuses only on a limited region, is G5 Sahel, which was created in December 2014 and includes Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.<sup>161</sup> In October 2017, the United States pledged \$60 million in security-assistance support to G5 Sahel, suggesting Washington may be interested in deepening its stake in a process now mainly backed by France, the EU, and the regional member states. Through this participation, the United States can serve as a force multiplier, augmenting actions already happening on the ground. Relatedly, the United States and its European allies would be wise to facilitate development of an overall coordination body aimed at helping better connect all three key regions of Africa (North, West, and East), which are dealing with similar problems.

Separately, as intimated earlier, questions remain on how strong an external operations capability IS in Libya truly has. Thus far, this capability has not equaled that of its counterpart in Syria.

Still, the potential for “remote-controlled” guidance as well as exploitation of migrant flows into Europe makes Libya-directed external operations a threat not to be ignored. Furthermore, European officials worry that the ranks of IS in Libya could be reinforced by foreign fighters previously in Iraq and Syria. According to Estonian interior minister Andres Anvelt, whose country held the six-month EU presidency from July to December 2017, “[European foreign fighters] are afraid to go back home because they have (committed) so-called war crimes or terrorist crimes. They are known...So they started to look for other places to fight and it is in North Africa...So far Libya, as the most unstable country in this area, is the biggest concern for Europe.”<sup>162</sup> Therefore, according to Anvelt, European security experts are attempting to build deeper ties to Libya, Niger, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco to better alleviate the possible flow of European foreign fighters to new destinations after the fall of the Islamic State’s twin capitals of Mosul and Raqqa.

Regional leaders are also concerned about the ramifications of the Islamic State’s loss of territory in Iraq and

Syria. For example, Algerian foreign minister Abdelkader Messahel warned that “the region is threatened...with the return of foreign fighters.”<sup>163</sup> Similarly, Egyptian president Abdul-Fattah al-Sisi has expressed worry that Egyptian foreign fighters will be able to easily return to Egypt by exploiting the porous border with Libya.<sup>164</sup> Such developments could, in turn, bolster IS operations in the Nile Valley or Western Desert, fears derived in part from the government’s belief that the April 2017 attacks on the Coptic Christian community in Minya were planned from Libya.<sup>165</sup> Such returnees could also bolster operations by the al-Murabitun Brigade, the al-Qaeda-aligned jihadist group based in Darnah, through welcoming IS fighters back into the fold and building on attacks recently perpetrated in the Bahariya oasis.

Permeable though the Libya-Egypt border may be, it will never compare with the situation in Turkey before spring 2015, when Turkey’s borders were more or less open to foreign fighter mobilization in Syria. More broadly, as Katherine Bauer notes, “geographic and demographic challenges make it unlikely that [IS in Libya] could take and hold territory without financial support from the core. Rather, Libya seems better suited as a regional hub than a strategic fallback.”<sup>166</sup> The diminishment of IS core resources, therefore, linked to its loss of territory in Iraq and Syria, further constrains the effort in Libya, which itself no longer controls territory and associated access to taxation revenue.

Although the mobilization of foreign fighters to Libya is currently at its lowest point since the Libyan revolution began in 2011, the consequences of the past several years will no doubt reverberate for a long while. Thus, a better understanding of the foreign fighter phenomenon, how it evolved, and its potential trajectories can help mitigate related problems in Africa and Europe in the coming years.

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