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## The Rise and Decline of Ansar al-Sharia in Libya

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Over the past two years, global attention has shifted to Syria and Iraq with the rise of Jabhat al-Nusra and the return of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). However, nearly one thousand miles to the west, Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL) has continued its work of facilitating a future Islamic state since the spectacular attack on the American consulate in Benghazi on September 11, 2012.

Initially, ASL launched a highly sophisticated program of *dawa* (outreach) which included the provisioning of social services both inside and outside of Libya. This has provided it with an avenue for local support. But since Libyan General Khalifa Haftar announced a major offensive against Islamist armed groups in eastern Libya in May 2014 (codenamed Operation Dignity), ASL has focused primarily on military action. ASL's fortunes have dropped dramatically in the process, further exacerbated by the death of its leader, Muhammad al-Zahawi, confirmed in January 2015, and ISIS' intensification of its efforts to create a Libyan base independent of ASL since November 2014. Set in this context, this piece will examine the ebb and flow in ASL's fortunes.

In many ways, ASL followed the model of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST), viewing its outreach and social services campaign as an important part of establishing and building not only an Islamic society, but an eventual Islamic state governed by its interpretations of Sharia (Islamic law). In contrast to the Libyan government, which is often corrupt, incompetent, or extractive, ASL worked to convince the local population of its own competence and benevolence. Critically, this helped it win greater public support.

In addition to ASL's reach across Libya, from Benghazi, Tripoli and Ajdabiya to Sirte, Darna and the Gulf of Sidra, among other smaller locales, it has also operated abroad. Most notably, it has dispatched operatives to Syria, Sudan and Gaza to assist in humanitarian relief efforts. This has added a whole new layer to the meaning of global jihad

and how various groups might try to engage populations outside their local areas of operation.

ASL has enjoyed a number of identities as an organization: On the one hand, it has been a charity, a security service, a health service and a religious education provider; on the other hand, it is also a militia, a terrorist organization and a training base for foreign jihadists. In recognition of this complexity, this analysis looks at the full spectrum of the group and teases out ASL's *dawa* campaign locally and globally; its hopes and future plans based off of its *dawa* literature on *aqida* (creed) and *manhaj* (methodology); its training of foreign fighters for the Syrian conflict as well as for the conflict with General Haftar; and, the rise of ISIS as a competitor. In sum, this essay seeks to provide a comprehensive view of ASL in its fourth year of existence.

### The *Dawa* First Strategy

In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, most specifically in countries like Egypt, Libya and Tunisia where regimes were fully overthrown, the public sphere opened. These countries also represented a fresh start and laboratory for a new jihadi campaign in the wake of al-Qaeda in Iraq's (AQI) failures at controlling territory and instituting governance last decade.

For example, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri thought that this new environment provided an opportunity "for *dawa* and informing...Only God knows for how long they [local governments and the West] will continue, so the people of Islam and Jihad should benefit from them and exploit them."<sup>1</sup> In the same audio message, he further emphasized the superiority of Sharia over all other legal systems and laws. Zawahiri also endorsed the liberation of Islamic lands, opposed normalizing relations with Israel and underscored the importance of "cleansing the lands" of financial and social corruption.

In 2004, the foremost respected Sunni jihadi ideologue alive today, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, wrote *Waqafat ma' Thamrat al-Jihad (Stances on the Fruit of Jihad)* in an attempt to steer the jihadi movement away from the abuses of his former student and AQI leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In the book, Maqdisi examines the differences between what he describes as *qital al-nikayya* (fighting to hurt or damage the enemy) and *qital al-tamkin* (fighting to consolidate one's power). Maqdisi argues that the former provides only short-term tactical victories whereas the latter

provides a framework for consolidating an Islamic state. Implicit is Maqdisi's emphasis on the importance of planning, organization, education and *dawa*.<sup>2</sup>

The formation of ASL along with its sister organizations in Tunisia (AST) and Egypt (ASE) were seen as logical conclusions and implementations of Zawahiri's and Maqdisi's ideas.<sup>3</sup> In short, these groups selected a *dawa*-first strategy instead of a jihad-first strategy. As a result, one of the main avenues through which ASL advanced its ideas was its social services programs. This cultivation of followers in a broad fashion - in contrast to the more vanguard-oriented organizations that have been involved in jihadism in a local, regional, or global capacity over the past 30 years - was seen as a new way to consolidate a future Islamic state.

At first, this approach appeared to forge a new and successful way forward for the jihadi movement, with an unprecedented number of individuals joining ASL and AST. Over the past two years, however, this *dawa*-first approach has backfired. Within a month of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's coup d'état in Egypt in early July 2013, all of the key members of ASE had either been arrested or had been forced to link-up with Jama'at Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis' growing insurgency in northern Sinai. Still others had fled to Syria to join the jihad against the Bashar al-Assad regime. Less than two months later, at the end of August 2013, the Tunisian government designated AST as a terrorist organization and proceeded to dismantle it via widespread arrests. As a result, some Tunisians left for Libya and joined up with ASL while others went to Syria and joined ISIS.

As for ASL, once General Haftar launched his war against them, it too mostly stopped conducting regular *dawa*. The *dawa* events it did sponsor were publicized after the fact and related to providing meat and food to the poor and needy during Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha in the summer and fall of 2014. Instead, much of what has been published by ASL since then has been related to the fighting with General Haftar's forces. Additionally, while still boasting of members in other cities, ASL has confined the vast majority of its military operations to Benghazi. And while ASL has not disintegrated like ASE or AST, its capacities have been severely degraded, providing ISIS with an opening in the fall of 2014.

At the height of ASL's campaign, it oversaw an extensive network of services inside and outside of Libya. In fact, it was involved in activities ranging from anti-drug campaigns, blood drives and food drives (including the slaughtering of animals on holidays for the poor) to Quranic competitions for children, housing projects for the poor, school cleanings, garbage removals and bridge repairs. ASL provided such tangible services to the community as opening a medical clinic for women and children, an Islamic Center for Women, an Emergency Room and a religious school named Mirkaz al-Imam al-Bukhari Li-l-'Ulum al-Sharia. ASL also maintained security at the major al-Jala' hospital in Benghazi.

What made these efforts much more impressive was that ASL was not just acting independently, but was getting support and co-sponsorship from other local organizations. The blood drives were coordinated with the Benghazi Central Blood Center (CBC), for which the CBC even presented ASL with an award on July 25, 2013. ASL also coordinated lectures with the Social Security Fund's Benghazi Branch and cleaned roads in cooperation with the electrical company and Tajama' al-Qawarshah al-Khayri wa-l-Da'wai. Moreover, the most successful program that ASL undertook was a vigorous anti-drug campaign together with the Rehab Clinic at the Psychiatric Hospital of Benghazi, the Ahli Club (soccer), Libya Company (Telecom and Technology) and the Technical Company. While in Sirte, ASL hosted a ten-day Quranic competition during Ramadan in association with the Office of Awqaf of Sirte, Radio Tawhid of Sirte, the Cleaning Services Company and the University of Sirte. Also during Ramadan, ASL assisted in a food drive that gained sponsorship from the Libya Company, Primera Gallery, al-Iman Foundation, Tajama' al-Qawarshah al-Khayri wa-l-Da'wai and the Faruq Center.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond its local efforts, ASL launched a robust campaign abroad too, targeting Syria, Sudan and Gaza. ASL dubbed these overseas *dawa* efforts "The Convoy Campaign of Goodness To Our People in 'X-location.'" These efforts began in November 2012 when ASL sent aid packages to Syria and Gaza, including its *dawa* literature. The most sophisticated operation, however, came in response to the major flooding that hit Sudan in August 2013. An ASL team landed in Khartoum with five tons of medicine, twelve tons of grains and legumes and eight tons of children's milk in tow. The second delivery contained twenty-four tons of clothing and 1.5 tons of floor carpets for mosques. All of these items and packages were stamped or plastered with ASL's logo.

The level of aid in itself was outstanding, but the fact that it came from a global jihadi organization that had procured and delivered it safely to Sudan's capital testifies to the group's organizational capabilities as well as its possible ties to the Sudanese government.

The same types of questions apply to ASL's operations in Syria, and its potential ties to the Turkish state. In Syria, the campaign was called "Uplifting the Ummah, freedom from forced rule, Western dominance, and uplifted by the goodness, pride and dignity under the law of *Rahman* (one of the holiest of the 99 names of God within Islam)." In late January 2014, ASL sent three tranches of aid, comprising slaughtered beef, flour and electric generators, to the rural Latakia towns of Salma and Kasab, among others. The effort in Syria illustrated a high level of planning and organization, since ASL had to gain access to local resources and grasp the human topography of the area. Lastly, also in late January 2014, ASL responded to an Israeli airstrike in Gaza.<sup>5</sup> The campaign was marketed as "We are over here in Libya and our eyes are on Jerusalem." ASL's contacts inside Gaza went door-to-door in the al-Nafaq neighborhood distributing cash-filled envelopes with ASL's logo to those "whose houses were damaged by the shelling of the Zionists." The speed of the campaign suggests the possibility of an ASL network in Gaza.<sup>7</sup>

While impressive, these overseas campaigns represent the height of ASL's influence and power. Since the fighting with General Haftar has commenced, ASL has shown no signs of continuing its international campaign. Instead, it has shifted increasingly into self-preservation mode. Prior to discussing the war with General Haftar, however, it is important to highlight the ideological backbone of ASL, especially since its key points are part of the literature that ASL had distributed during its local and international *dawa*.

### Ideological Outlook

One of the most important pamphlets that ASL passed out during its *dawa* efforts educated individuals on its doctrine and agenda.<sup>7</sup> ASL's core ideology has particular global jihadi underpinnings. First, there is immense emphasis on the *tawhid* (pure monotheism) of God, as "there is no other God, and there is nothing that can be revered like Him." The source of "interference or deduction" is the Quran, the "word of God Almighty," and the Sunna (actions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), which "sets out and explains the Quran."

Second, as the pamphlet makes clear, if a Muslim does not follow the literal authority of God, then he is branded or “excommunicated” as a *kafir* (unbeliever). Anyone who “calls for anything other than Islam,” such as “democracy” or “secularism,” manifests infidelity, or *kufr*, and is deemed “nugatory.” The permissibility of *takfir* (excommunication) appears to stem from the institutional necessity to impose obedience through a set of actions and beliefs extracted and interpreted literally from the Quran and the Sunna.

Third, the pamphlet maintains that the theological mechanism to purge the Ummah (Islamic community) of *kufur* and to implement *tawhid* is military jihad. Jihad does not require a religious verdict set down by an imam because fighting the *kufar* (infidels) is “more obligatory in the world than adhering to the [Islamic] faith.” Thus, waging jihad is considered a fundamental prerequisite to being considered a genuine Muslim. If a Muslim wages jihad against the declared *kufar*, then ASL will not “accuse [that Muslim] of being a sinner.”

Moreover, the “blood of Muslims is not haram,” or forbidden, because there is no higher duty than jihad. The prioritization of military strength and discipline is the *sine qua non* of uniting the Ummah into one Muslim entity. Political parties, even Islamic ones, represent a pluralistic, democratic process, and therefore serve to “divide up the Ummah.” Ultimately, ASL aims to establish an authoritative, theological state based on Sharia to supplant the current laws and constitution. ASL’s agenda appears to be local; namely, to fight rival militias in a war to control Libya and to reform it into an Islamic state. However, the beliefs and theological justifications for violent action suggest a complete rejection of the current world order and constant conflict.

Another of ASL’s pamphlets explains its issues with democracy in detail.

<sup>8</sup> Besides its focus on *tawhid* and the necessity of jihad, ASL has a deep aversion to democracy. The pamphlet’s main argument is that “democracy” constitutes the antithesis to *shura* (council), or Islamic governance based on Sharia. There are three fundamental differences that make democracy and Islam incompatible: democracy is based on the “rule of the people” while *shura* is based on the “rule of God”; democracy enforces man-made laws forbidden in Islam while *shura* uses judicial *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) to make individual evaluations of cases in strict accordance with Islamic teachings; and, democratic systems are ruled by people while *shura* is ruled by God. The purpose of the pamphlet is to delegitimize those Arab leaders who claim to be pious

Muslims but govern and acquire political power through, or under the guise of, democracy. More importantly, by placing democracy and Islam in irreconcilable positions, ASL undercuts Islamic democratic parties, such as the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party, which seek to apply Islamic principles to public policy within a democratic framework.

For ASL, not only is "democracy" fundamentally incompatible with Islam, but it is also framed in its literature as an authoritarian system. As the pamphlet makes clear, ASL directly associates the offshoots of liberal values found in many democratic societies, such as "lusts," "defamation" and "wine, clown-like behavior, songs, debaucherous behavior, adultery [and] cinemas" with the imposition of *kufir* institutions such as the Charter of the United Nations, the laws of the General Assembly and the "laws of [democratically-elected] parties." Thus, the logic follows: if one does not engage in acts of lust and defamation, then one is deemed "extreme, terroristic and not tending towards world peace and coexistence." By imposing specific non-Islamic values on society and excluding Sharia-sanctioned law, "democracy" directly seeks to eradicate Islam. Moreover, elected assemblies and parliaments are built by "majority rule," a concept that "bears no relation to the Quran and the Hadith," and thus seeks to eradicate God-sanctioned rule. Lastly, ASL tars democracy with the failure of the Arab uprisings to bring about better governance, especially in Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan and Yemen. The lesson learned from those uprisings is that democracy is full of "provisions and deceitful illusions." Essentially, the pre-Arab uprising dictators and civil unrest that followed are the products of "democracy."

A third pamphlet that ASL has distributed among its supporters and would-be recruits is on how to handle interactions with police officers, should they be stopped in the street.<sup>9</sup> This pamphlet provides talking points relating to the current Libyan system in order to sow doubts among the police and encourage defections. ASL talking points include invoking God as one and the only arbitrator and source of governing authority, while the role of humans is emphasized as simply fighting "whatever governs that does not come from God." God, the ASL pamphlet argues, "will not rely on [humans] for governing," but simply to eradicate "evil" or anything that does not adhere to a literal interpretation of Islamic texts. By prosecuting criminals under Libyan civil code, policemen are actually "forcing people into *kufir*" because those people become subject to *taghut* (tyrants). The concepts of

“policemen” and the “army” are not rejected, but only if the authorities “legislate” with Sharia.

A final ideological statement worth highlighting pertains to ASL’s global outlook. While ASL has focused mainly on local issues, it does have a global dimension and is very much within the ideological milieu of global jihadism. ASL’s statement in response to the United States’ seizure of Abu Anas al-Libi, a Libyan wanted for his part in the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings, is emblematic of its global outlook.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, ASL argues that the United States is seeking to destroy Islam and impose its own culture, values and laws on Muslims and their lands. The U.S., called *al-kufar*, does this in three ways. First, it is “preventing the Muslims from establishing an [Islamic] state.” Examples of this are coalition campaigns against the Taliban in Afghanistan and Islamists in northern Mali.

Second, the statement charges that the “war against and pursuit of jihad and the mujahideen,” or “war against terrorism,” is “at its essence a war against Islam.” When intervening in other countries’ affairs, the U.S. often targets “whoever they wish unsupervised and unaccountable” (an allusion to al-Libi, but more importantly the killing of Osama bin Laden without Pakistani consultation) while “violating holy sites and [Muslim] lands” (an allusion to Operation Desert Shield, Iraqi Freedom). Under the pretext of fighting terrorism, the U.S. as the “decision-maker and leader of the world” is in reality attempting to impose its “unlawful assertions of ‘superiority’ over creation.” ASL attributes Libya’s chaos to the U.S. intervention and subsequent attempt to impose the “tyranny of democracy,” which is fully preventing the rule of Sharia. This aggression, arrogance and lack of respect for Muslims derives from the United States’ *kafir* values of “murder and displacement” - a clear reference to America’s history of slavery, troubled race relations and conflicts with Native Americans.

Third, ASL argues that “terrorism” is used by the U.S. as a label for those who do not adhere to their “democratic” agenda. In response, ASL calls for a mass campaign to “inform every Muslim of the goals of these belligerent states and their allies.” The logic is that before being able and willing to wage jihad, the fighter must be indoctrinated with the belief that he is defending his religion and way of life. ASL urges Muslims to accept the scholar Ahmad Shaker’s decree that “any cooperation with the British [or in the current case, the Americans], no matter how small, is tantamount to unbridled apostasy...” Thus, for reasons already stated,

Muslims must be in a constant state of war with the United States. In the context of Libya, ASL believes the country is suffering from “humiliation and disgrace” because it abandoned “governing with Islamic Sharia.” By adopting a Western-style parliamentary system and not a Sharia-based one, the Libyan government is essentially “fighting Islam.” Like the post-Saddam and post-Salih governments in Iraq and Yemen, respectively, post-Qaddafi Libya is attempting to adhere to Western standards of governance.

### Hisbah and the War with Haftar

Indeed, while *dawa* has been ASL’s main focus, it has also taken part in *hisbah* (enjoining right and forbidding wrong; usually connoting vigilante activities) and jihad.<sup>11</sup> With regard to *hisbah*, ASL’s Zahawi admitted that his group has been involved in the demolition of Sufi shrines and places of worship.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, ASL stormed the European School in Benghazi and confiscated books on the human body it deemed “pornographic,” and thus contrary to Islam.<sup>13</sup> Intimidated, teachers at the school blacked out those sections depicting the human body. In one video, members of Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte whipped some alleged transgressors of Sharia tens of times.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, there have been numerous unsolved assassinations of security officials, government officials and civil society activists, many of which are suspected to be the work of ASL.

ASL’s most well-known act of jihad is its attack on the United States consulate in Benghazi. Although there was no formal claim of responsibility, the ambiguous language used in the initial statement by ASL’s spokesman, Hani al-Mansuri, suggests that some ASL members participated in the assault. As Mansuri carefully put it, “Katibat Ansar al-Sharia [in Benghazi] as a military did not participate formally/officially and not by direct orders.”<sup>15</sup> It is likely that some of ASL’s local allies in other militias were involved, too.

On a more regional scale, similar to the Iraq jihad, Libya has become a training hub for those seeking jihad in Syria. In fact, most of those who train in Libyan camps – suspected in Misrata, Benghazi, the desert area near Hon and in the Green Mountains in the east – come from the countries surrounding Libya.<sup>16</sup>

There is increasing proof that ASL is training individuals to fight in Syria. On August 6, 2013, two videos leaked online of Tunisians who had

been detained by locals in the Derna region and interrogated.<sup>17</sup> Based on the information in the videos, the footage is likely from the late spring or early summer of 2012. It seems ASL was already actively training fighters for Syria, an ominous fact considering what transpired in Benghazi on September 11, 2012. Furthermore, members of AST less interested in *dawa* are likely preparing and training in Libya in preparation for a potential insurgency or terrorism in Tunisia.<sup>18</sup> For example, one Tunisian who had trained in Libya was responsible for an unsuccessful suicide bombing at a beach resort in Sousse, a city southeast of Tunis, in October 2013.<sup>19</sup>

While *hisbah* and foreign fighter training has continued in the shadows over the past few years, ASL's war with General Haftar has taken on a more public face, both in its messaging and online content dimensions. Since General Haftar announced Operation Dignity on May 17, the nature of ASL's public presentation has been more of a jihad-first than a *dawa*-first approach.

In late May 2014, at the outset of the conflict, Zahawi held an off the record press briefing in which he denounced General Haftar and labeled his offensive a crusade against Islam. Zahawi's comments identified the United States, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Egypt as backers of General Haftar, allowing Zahawi to allude to past outside interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia and warn the United States against joining the battle. Zahawi struck a defiant tone, asserting that ASL was winning: "We thank God that we were able to defeat Haftar and we challenge him to attempt entering Benghazi again. We warn him that if he continues this war against us, Muslims from across the world will come to fight, as is the case in Syria right now. The war would continue and Ansar al-Sharia would decide when it ends."<sup>20</sup>

Ever since, ASL's propaganda has cast the residents of Benghazi as victims of aggression. For example, in a video dated May 31, 2014, one interviewee bemoans the destruction of his house and property, which had been shelled by General Haftar's forces.<sup>21</sup> One month later, on July 29, ASL released a video telling the story of how General Haftar's army bombed the people of Benghazi while ASL stood in valiant defense of the city.<sup>22</sup> On August 7, ASL released footage of yet more destruction, with buildings burning and neighborhoods destroyed; on December 1,

ASL publicized a series of pictures of burnt out apartments and homes

in the Sabri neighborhood of Benghazi.<sup>23</sup> The cumulative intent of these moves, of course, was to shape the war of public opinion against General Haftar.

Beyond fully mobilizing and militarizing ASL in Benghazi, the war united a number of Islamist factions under the banner of Majlis Shura Thuwar Benghazi (MSTB, the Benghazi Revolutionaries Consultative Council). On June 20, 2014, ASL, Raf Allah al-Sahati Brigade, February 17th Martyrs Brigade, Libya Shield 1, and Jaysh al-Mujahidin announced their alliance.<sup>24</sup> MSTB designated ASL's Zahawi as its leader, with Wisam bin Hamid of Libya Shield 1 as the military leader and Jalal Makhzum of Raf Allah al-Sahati Brigade serving as the military commander. To this day, MSTB remains a potent force, with its leaders releasing joint videos, as on October 5, when bin Hamid stated, "[w]e advise [Haftar's army] to return from what they are doing and that they repent to Allah the mighty before it is too late." Zahawi added, gleefully: "I congratulate our people in Benghazi on this great victory, and we wish to remain until we complete the phase we are in, and this is to control Benghazi, and God willing it will be safer for its sons and its people."<sup>25</sup> Since December 12, ASL has expanded its operations beyond Benghazi to Derna, in part due to its commitments with another newly-created umbrella organization. Indeed, ASL joined the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade and Jaysh al-Islami al-Libi under the banner of Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin Derna (MSMD, the Derna Mujahidin Consultative Council).<sup>26</sup>

Unlike in Benghazi, ASL does not have leading positions in this alliance, highlighting its weaker position in Derna. Instead, the head of the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade, Salim Dirby, leads MSMD with ASL's Sufyan bin Qumu positioned as a military commander alongside Yusuf bin Tahir of Jaysh al-Islami al-Libi. While in Benghazi the Majlis is fighting General Haftar, the umbrella in Derna in addition to fighting Haftar is also in direct competition with Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam (MSSI), which pledged *baya* (fealty) to ISIS and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

While Libya has become a key jihadi battleground, it has not exacted the same gravitational pull on foreign fighters as the conflict in Syria. However, Libyan training camps are now producing some fighters, initially intended for Syria, who are instead joining up with ASL or the

Islamic State in Libya (ISL). The majority of foreign fighters in Libya are from the surrounding countries of Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Sudan and Morocco, but they also include some fighters from Palestine, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

### Zahawi's Death and the Rise of Islamic State in Libya

Similar to other conflict zones, most notably Syria, it seems that the upstart wilayat (provinces) that ISIS has “annexed” in Libya have recently drawn supporters from ASL.<sup>27</sup> In part, this is due to the perception that ISIS is winning, has momentum, and is the “cool” jihadi group. Another likely blow to ASL is the death of Zahawi, which was confirmed in January 2015, even if he had been wounded and out of sight since late October 2014.<sup>28</sup>

The quick rise of MSSI illustrates the changing nature of jihadism in Libya, but generally across the Arab world there has been a split between factions aligned with al-Qaeda and those closer to ISIS. MSSI publicly announced its existence on April 4, 2014, when masked members of the group took to the streets of Derna wearing military uniforms, driving pickup trucks and brandishing rocket-propelled grenade launchers, machine guns and anti-aircraft cannons. They loudly proclaimed the imposition of Sharia.<sup>29</sup> Until it formally announced allegiance to ISIS, MSSI was involved in such activities as security patrols and guarding the al-Huraysh hospital in Derna. They also publicized those who would “repent” to their cause, confiscated drugs and alcohol, and executed individuals.

In the lead up to ISIS formally “annexing” territory and turning MSSI into Wilayat al-Barqah, MSSI released a statement on June 22, 2014 in support of ISIS and Baghdadi.<sup>30</sup> The statement was followed by a formal declaration of allegiance on October 3 that ceded MSSI's territory in Derna to the caliphate.<sup>31</sup> In honor of the occasion, MSSI organized a forum at al-Sahaba mosque called *khilafah ala manhaj al-nabawiyah* (the Caliphate upon the methodology of the Prophet), a slogan used by ISIS over the past few years. A month and a half later, Baghdadi released an audio message declaring the creation of new “provinces” in various Arab countries, including Libya. This conferred new legitimacy upon MSSI, which would operate within three Libyan provinces: Wilayat al-Barqah in the east, Wilayat Fizzan in the south, and Wilayat al-Tarabulus in the west. Highlighting the change, ISIS took control of MSSI's media operations.<sup>32</sup>

Since then, ISL has slowly expanded its writ across different parts of Libya, executing and beheading members of General Haftar's forces along the way. Since the beginning of 2015, ISL has been involved in fighting in Benghazi, Sirte and Derna. It may also have executed two secular Tunisian journalists and killed twenty-one Egyptian Christian hostages in areas around Sirte as well as conducted a terrorist attack against the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli. While in Sirte and Derna, it has stepped up its *hisbah* patrols in local markets to ensure that they are not selling rotten or spoiled foods, confiscated hookahs (and closed stores selling tobacco since they view it as against Islam) and ordered stores to suspend sales during daily prayers. It has also conducted some *dawa* activities, the largest on November 25, 2014 under the motto of "The Caliphate upon the *Manhaj* [methodology] of the Prophet." Additionally, it is also providing aid to the poor and needy and giving gifts and sweets to children in Benghazi in order to curry favor. In a move similar to Syria, ISL is now attempting to impose regulations on pharmacies and locals in the health industry. Of course, this shouldn't be interpreted as Islamic State taking full control of Libya, or even any of these cities, but it does highlight its growing presence and prestige.

These developments appear to be eroding ASL's legitimacy as well as its closely guarded and painstakingly manicured reputation. In response, in late January 2015 ASL began trotting out its new Islamic police force and Sharia court in Benghazi. Quite possibly, ASL feels compelled to compete openly with ISL, especially as it loses members to ISL. This could lead to eventual violence between the two groups similar to what occurred between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS in Syria. As of now, there has not been any internecine jihadi fighting. In fact, there are rumors that ASL could pledge allegiance to ISL soon, especially in light of ASL's Sharia official Abu 'Abd Allah al-Libi pledging *baya* to Baghdadi.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

As a result of Zahawi's death and the growth of the Islamic State in Libya, there are many outstanding questions for ASL. It remains an important military force in Benghazi and Derna, but will ASL sustain its independence or slowly merge with these other militant outfits? Will the growth of ISL lead to internecine fighting, as has occurred between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria? Furthermore, can ASL sustain operations in cities beyond its Benghazi base? It is too early to tell, but if the current trajectory continues, ISL might swallow up ASL recruits outside of Benghazi and even make inroads within the city itself. Jihadi

organizations, including ASL, have always been nimble and adaptable; as we have seen with Jabhat al-Nusra, they have been able to survive the challenge from ISIS. For now, however, ASL faces an uncertain future and the prospect of cooptation by ISL or decline.

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- <sup>1</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri, "So Lose Not Heart, Nor Fall Into Despair," *As-Sahab Media*, August 14, 2011. ~
  - <sup>2</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "Maqdisi's disciples in Libya and Tunisia," *Foreign Policy's Middle East Channel*, November 14, 2012; Aaron Y. Zelin, "Know Your Ansar al-Sharia," *Foreign Policy*, September 21, 2012. ~
  - <sup>3</sup> Ibid. ~
  - <sup>4</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "Libya's Jihadists Beyond Benghazi," *Foreign Policy's Middle East Channel*, August 12, 2013. ~
  - <sup>5</sup> Amos Harel, "Israel kills two Gaza militants, including one behind rockets during Sharon funeral," *Haaretz*, January 22, 2014. ~
  - <sup>6</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "Tunisia: Uncovering Ansar al-Sharia," *Think Africa Press*, October 25, 2013. ~
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