The Islamic State in Libya Has Yet to Recover

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

Given the group's operational silence and loss of foreign help, it may not be able to launch the type of insurgency seen in Syria, but that could change if U.S. attention wanes militarily or diplomatically.

On December 6, 2016, the Islamic State in Libya (ISL) lost its last vestige of territorial control when it surrendered the north-central city of Sirte. Three years later, the group is a shadow of its former self, despite the fact that around twenty-five ISL members pledged allegiance (*baya*) to the new leader of their transnational parent organization on November 15.

In the past, ISL sought to replicate Islamic State practices in Iraq and Syria, reaching similar levels of military and governance success. Today, however, ISL has not claimed responsibility for a single attack in six months, and has suffered substantial setbacks in recruitment, funding, and media capabilities. This is why it has consolidated its three Libyan "provinces" into one entity in order to streamline decisionmaking, similar to what the Islamic State did in Iraq and Syria. Yet ISL does not appear to have the same staying power as its brethren did in Iraq last decade or in Syria today—assuming the United States and other actors are willing to keep up the pressure.

PROPAGANDA SINCE THE FALL OF SIRTE

Over the past three years, ISL has released only four video messages, suggesting its media operations have been severely degraded. The most recent was published this week, most likely to rally supporters. It had nothing new to show, however, relying on footage of past attacks from this spring and indirectly confirming the group's weakness.

In the previous three videos, the following themes were most resonant:

- September 2017: "We will be patient and persistent."
- July 2018: "Commit to jihad for the sake of God and fight."
- July 2019: "We are still one in the covenant."

These ideas are in line with the general narratives that the Islamic State has been pushing in various countries, illustrating

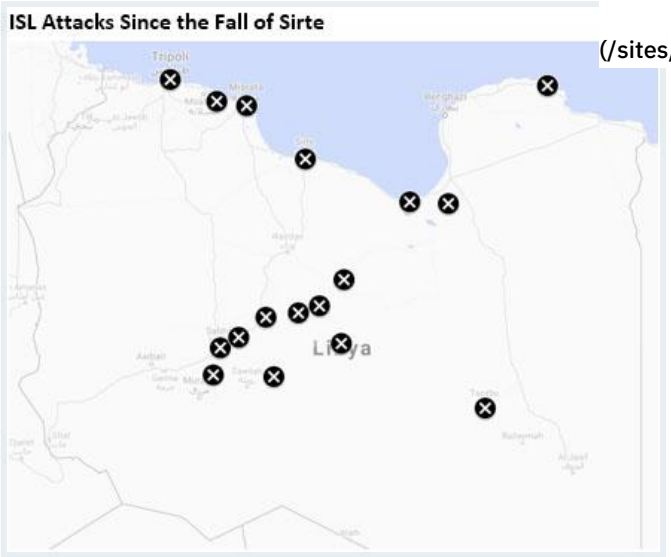
how ISL has maintained fealty to the parent group's messaging methodologies despite the strain it is under in Libya.

That said, the timing of the third video indicates a communication delay between ISL and IS. That video was part of a series of messages reaffirming pledges of *baya* to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the IS leader at the time. Yet ISL's video was the eighth to be released, even though it had previously been the strongest IS franchise outside the core. Similarly, after Baghdadi was **killed in late October (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/baghdadi-has-joined-the-mount-rushmore-of-jihad)** , ISL's *baya* to the new leader was released a full two weeks after IS conducted a media campaign to showcase continuing support in its core and external "provinces."

MILITARY OPERATIONS SINCE THE FALL OF SIRTE

Following ISL's territorial disintegration, the group went underground and was relatively quiet in 2017, partly due to follow-on U.S. airstrikes against its camps outside Sirte. ISL claimed responsibility for just four attacks that year: two in Sirte, and one each in Misratah and Ajdabiya. These were likely attacks of opportunity rather than a coordinated campaign.

The tempo began to increase in February 2018, when ISL seemingly decided the time had come to reemerge from the shadows and renew its insurgency. The group conducted attacks in many locales through December of that year: four in Ajdabiya, three in Tripoli, two in Jufrah, and one each in Sirte, Awjilah, al-Uqaylah, al-Fuqaha, Wadi Kaam, and Tazirbu. ISL became so confident that in August 2018, it began to man checkpoints on the road between Ajdabiya and Jalu; two months later, it claimed it had taken over the town of al-Fuqaha for a few hours.



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According to Italian journalist Daniele Raineri, however, this momentum was halted in December 2018, when the Libyan National Army (LNA) discovered an ISL base near the oasis town of Ghadduwah. The group then moved to the volcanic field of Haruj and began operating again in April 2019, conducting eleven attacks in the ensuing weeks: two in Sabha, two in Tmassah, and one each in al-Fuqaha (a town it once again claimed to take over briefly), Ghadduwah, Zillah, Darnah, Samnu, Haruj, and Checkpoint 400 between Sabha and Jufrah. These attacks came to an end when the LNA found ISL's latest base of operations in mid-June, and it has yet to recover.

DEGRADATION OF ISL

The group's decreased operational tempo and broader inability to rebuild itself in a sustainable manner can be attributed to three main factors:

U.S. airstrikes. In addition to local efforts to stifle ISL networks and activities, the United States has continued its airstrikes against the group's assets and camps. This has neutered ISL's ability to sustain any type of resurgence—a lesson Washington likely learned from its failure to turn tactical victories in Iraq a decade ago into something more strategic. In mid-November, Defense Secretary Mark Esper described this strategy as "mowing the lawn," explaining that "every now and then, you have to do these things to stay on top of it so that a threat doesn't grow, doesn't resurge." Since the fall of Sirte, U.S. Africa Command

has announced ten sets of airstrike operations against ISL, mainly targeting roving camps, vehicles, and group members. According to U.S. defense officials, the most recent series of strikes took place this September and killed 43 ISL militants—a setback that reportedly left as few as 100 fighters still in action nationwide.

Downfall of foreign fighter networks. Even at ISL's peak, a good portion of its activities were run by foreigners, especially Tunisians, Sudanese, and Egyptians. Many of these foreign operatives were killed in the campaign that Misratah's al-Bunyan al-Marsus and other forces launched to take back territory seized by ISL. Others fled to Tunisia (to assist the Islamic State's network there), Sinai (to join the local IS insurgency), or Sudan (whether to find safe haven or facilitate logistics between different networks in the region). When jihadist groups "go to ground," it is more difficult for foreigners to fit it in within the local milieu, and **foreign fighters have not been joining ISL (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-others-foreign-fighters-in-libya-and-the-islamic-state)** as they did during the group's 2014-2016 height.

Financial pain. For years, ISL relied on funding from its parent organization, but much of this money has dried up since the Islamic State lost its territory in Iraq and Syria. That said, UN reports indicate that ISL has attempted to diversify its funding through local sources, such as investing in small- and medium-size enterprises in coastal cities, extorting Libyan citizens, taxing human trafficking networks, and kidnapping individuals for ransom. The latter efforts were curtailed at the beginning of this year by LNA raids on ISL's Ghadduwah encampment, where the group had reportedly been holding twenty-four hostages.

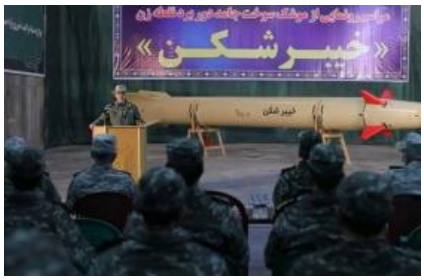
THE FUTURE OF ISL

The Islamic State's long-term capacity to launch and sustain an insurgency in Libya is difficult to predict given the country's ongoing civil war. The fact that ISL has been unable to take advantage of said conflict provides some hope, illustrating that Libyans may not be as susceptible to the group's ideology or brutality as some foreigners have been. Yet changing dynamics could free more space for ISL to operate. In particular, Gen. Khalifa Haftar's current campaign to take Tripoli might help the group recruit disgruntled or outraged Islamists who believe joining ISL is their only option for revenge.

For the time being, ISL has been unable to carry out the type of resurgence that the main IS predecessor group, the Islamic State in Iraq, achieved after major setbacks in 2006-2009. Even at the latter group's lowest point, its operational tempo was much higher than ISL's has been in the past three years. And by 2012, it was already clear that the Iraqi organization was rebuilding itself and taking advantage of unrest at home and new opportunities in Syria. Of course, Libya does not have the same type of sectarian dynamics seen in Iraq, let alone a brewing civil war next door like the one that broke out in Syria. If such a conflict were to emerge in Egypt, Sudan, or Algeria, it would certainly alter ISL's prospects, but that seems unlikely in the near term.

Even so, Washington needs to continue coordinating airstrikes and sharing intelligence with its partners in Libya in order to break up ISL camps and prevent the group from carrying out an Iraq/Syria-style resurgence. In addition, U.S. diplomats should mediate between various Libyan parties locally and internationally to help avert the negative consequences that a full-on assault of Tripoli could have in terms of boosting ISL's prospects for a comeback.

Aaron Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of the forthcoming book Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad **(https://cup.columbia.edu/book/your-sons-are-at-your-service/9780231193771)** . ❖



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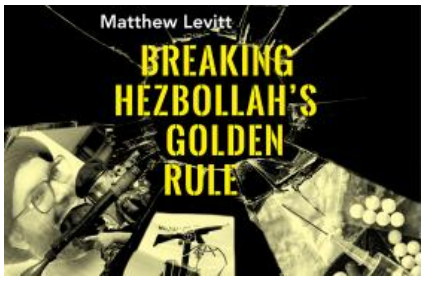

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