

Manchester Attack Highlights Foreign Fighters in Libya

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Brief Analysis

Even as the Islamic State continues to lose territory, its evolution in Libya since 2014 should convince Western authorities not to underestimate its capacity for directing lethal attacks abroad.

After Libyan British jihadi Salman Abedi killed twenty-two people in Manchester earlier this week, a friend of his noted that he had just returned from a three-week trip to Libya only days before the bombing. Although British investigators have yet to uncover or disclose publicly that the twenty-two-year-old suspect joined the Islamic State or received training while in Libya, his brother reportedly admitted that they were with IS following his arrest earlier today in Tripoli. In addition, IS has claimed responsibility for the bombing, and the French government has since revealed that Abedi traveled to Syria as well, raising concerns that the attack was the group's first directed operation from Libya into Europe. If so, it reiterates the dangers of foreign fighter training abroad. It also puts the spotlight on the flow of foreign fighters to Libya, which many have understandably ignored due to the even larger flows seen in Iraq and Syria.

A LONGSTANDING PROBLEM IN LIBYA

The phenomenon of foreigners traveling to fight in Libya is not new. According to U.S. officials, dozens of such individuals arrived to join the rebellion against Muammar Qadhafi's regime as early as September 2011. Since then, foreign fighter involvement inside Libya has developed in two phases: the first related to al-Qaeda's network (2011-2013), and a second related to the IS network (2014-present). This is not to say that al-Qaeda members are no longer operating in Libya, but the vast majority of foreign fighters present there since 2014 have been more closely associated with IS. And while North Africans have consistently arrived in higher numbers than other nationalities during both phases, IS recruitment efforts in Libya have resulted in a far more diverse group overall.

In the first phase, the key organizations involved in facilitating foreign fighters in Libya were al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Mokhtar Belmokhtar's group al-Murabitun (which has since rejoined AQIM), Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL), and Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST). At the time, AQIM mainly used Libya as a base for transferring and storing weapons, which had flooded the market following Qadhafi's fall. These arms were then trafficked to Algeria, Mali, and Tunisia in particular.

Meanwhile, al-Murabitun was using southern Libya as a safe haven following France's early 2013 intervention in northern Mali. Unlike AQIM's focus on weapons trafficking, Belmokhtar's group treated Libya as a launch point for mass-casualty attacks in Algeria and Niger that year.

For its part, ASL -- a primarily local organization that lacked the more transnational character of AQIM and al-Murabitun -- was focused on training individuals who sought experience prior to joining the Syrian jihad. Most of these trainees were from North Africa, especially Tunisia, which is no surprise given that the vast majority were recruited through ASL's sister organization AST. In addition, ASL provided safe haven for several Egyptians connected to the Nasr City cell, a group linked with the network that attacked the U.S. consulate in Benghazi in September 2012. At the time, AST's secret military wing also used Libyan territory to train operatives for attacks inside Tunisia, most notably the assassination of two leftist politicians in February and July 2013 and the failed October 2013 plot against Sousse and Monastir.

By late 2013-early 2014, however, a shift began to occur in the network of foreign fighters joining up in Libya. Part of this was a consequence of two developments: the Tunisian government designating AST as a terrorist group in August 2013, and Libyan general Khalifa Haftar's forces attacking ASL in May 2014. The shift was also rooted in the reemergence of IS in Iraq and Syria at that time, which spurred many foreign fighters in Syria to defect from local al-Qaeda branch Jabhat al-Nusra. This included numerous Libyans and Tunisians; in fact, the latter represented the largest foreign contingent in both Syria and Libya.

As part of its "caliphate" project, IS sought to expand its territory beyond Iraq and Syria, with Libya eventually proving to be the best potential "province." When the group began dispatching Libyans and Tunisians back to Libya in early 2014, it overtook significant portions of ASL's network, allowing IS to build up its local capacities (especially in Sirte) while gaining access to facilitation and logistics networks related to foreign fighters.

Previously, most of the foreign fighters traveling to Libya hailed from Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, the Palestinian territories, and Tunisia. Yet once IS became the main recruiter there, individuals from Europe, North America, South Asia, and other parts of the Middle East and Africa began to show up as well. In all, around 2,000 foreigners are believed to have joined IS in Libya, with half of them from Tunisia alone. While this is well below Syria's 40,000 foreign fighters, it is still the fourth largest mobilization of foreigners in global jihadi history, eclipsed only by the Syria war, the Afghan jihad of the 1980s, and last decade's Iraq war.

POST-SIRTE

In 2016, IS lost its Sirte stronghold, making the potential return of hundreds of foreign fighters a much larger concern. The fear was most acute in Tunisia, which had already suffered multiple attacks by an IS training camp in Sabratha, Libya, throughout 2015, as well as an attempted territorial takeover in Ben Gardane in early 2016. Returnees were also particularly worrisome in East and West Africa countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sudan, which had not previously dealt with foreign jihadi mobilizations aside from local or neighboring insurgencies. Moreover, European officials began warning that IS would attempt to exploit the migration flows from Libya in the same way they had done with the refugee flows from Syria -- a major problem given that the latter development had provided cover for the November 2015 Paris attacks.

Leading up to the Manchester operation, IS in Libya began showing signs that it had larger aspirations for attacks

inside Europe. According to German officials, Tunisian terrorist Anis Amri, who conducted the December truck attack against a Berlin Christmas market, had been in contact with IS operatives in Libya via the messaging application Telegram prior to the incident, suggesting it was partially remote-controlled, though not fully directed from there. This discovery spurred a mid-January U.S. airstrike against two camps belonging to an IS planning cell south of Sirte, which American officials believed had been set up recently to direct attacks in Europe. Yet the Manchester attack suggests that the group's external operations capacity in Libya might not be fully degraded.

Therefore, while most of the focus has been on eliminating key IS external operations personnel in Syria over the past two years, a similar approach should now be taken against the smaller but potentially dangerous cadre in Libya. Beyond protecting Europe, U.S. and EU officials should also ensure that their allies in East and West Africa are prepared to handle returnees from Libya. Moreover, if the Manchester attack is definitively tied to IS cells in Libya, it would show that the group can still be a lethal actor even without holding territory there -- an important point to consider when planning for life after the fall of the group's "capitals" in Iraq and Syria.

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