

# Defeating the Islamic State in Sirte: Secondary Effects and Remaining Challenges

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Brief Analysis

**While recent battlefield successes against the group's Libyan stronghold are encouraging, the threat persists, and political dysfunction remains a significant obstacle to stabilizing the country.**

The battle to uproot the Islamic State in Libya (ISL) from Sirte, the group's de facto North African capital, may soon result in victory for the Western-backed Operation Binyan Marsous (Solid Structure). Although defeating ISL in the heart of Libya's "oil crescent" is cause for celebration, the group will continue to conduct irregular warfare and could find safe haven in the southern desert, while some of its foreign fighters might return to their home countries to wage terrorist attacks. Moreover, other violent extremist organizations (VEOs), including those associated with al-Qaeda, continue to pose security challenges of their own. The political front is no less fraught -- Washington had hoped the battle against ISL would unify opposing factions around the Government of National Accord (GNA), but this unity has yet to materialize, and political infighting remains a significant obstacle to stabilization.

## AFTER SIRTE: A DYNAMIC AND ADAPTABLE ISL

Sirte would not be ISL's first territorial setback. Previously, the group made claim to Darnah once Libyan jihadist fighters with the al-Battar Battalion returned home after joining the Islamic State parent organization in Syria in 2012. But under pressure from airstrikes by Egyptian, Emirati, and Libyan National Army (LNA) forces and, more important, competing VEOs on the ground, ISL evacuated the city in June 2015. The group proved resilient, however, emerging stronger in the Gulf of Sirte.

ISL is also quite adaptable, sometimes conducting terrorist and small-unit guerrilla attacks typically associated with groups that do not control territory, and at other times operating like a conventional force that does hold territory. Accordingly, while denying the group its North African capital would be a strategic blow to the caliphate-building

enterprise, it would not take away ISL's ability to execute more of the small-unit raids, suicide attacks, and bombings that characterized its initial emergence in Libya.

ISL's continued presence in Libya also creates the potential for more large-scale terrorist attacks in Tunisia and Egypt. Just as the Islamic State's loss of territory in Iraq and Syria spurred a strategic shift toward high-casualty, asymmetric terrorist attacks in Baghdad, Istanbul, and European cities, ISL could do the same in Tunis, Cairo, and elsewhere. According to one publicly available registry of ISL fighters present in Bin Jawad between May 8 and June 6, most of the foreign fighters in the area hail from Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere in Africa (not including the members from Libya itself). And security officials in Tunis recently alleged that Tunisian ISL members are planning to attack security forces and the beleaguered tourist sector back home. Indeed, the Tunisian-dominated ISL infrastructure in the Libyan town of Sabratha has reportedly launched cross-border attacks in the past and could do so again.

## **A NEW SAFE HAVEN IN THE SOUTH?**

**U**nlike its parent organization, ISL has not had much success so far in exploiting ungoverned territories rife with sectarianism and factionalism. As pressure mounts on the group along the northern, populous coastline, however, ISL could redirect more of its efforts southward, exploiting critical oil and water resources (e.g., the Great Man-Made River) on which Libya depends, taking up gold prospecting, and smuggling people, weapons, and drugs. The Islamic State has profited greatly from taxing tribes involved in smuggling, earning millions of dollars from the illicit oil trade across the Syria-Iraq border; likewise, ISL could attempt to impose itself over lucrative illicit desert trade routes.

There are also complex, extensive, and exploitable grievances across the Sahara and Sahel regions. Historic neglect by, and resentment toward, coastal elites have long driven conflict in southern Libya, as have intertribal disputes over territory and trade. There is precedence in the region for VEOs hijacking local grievances for their own gain: the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), a Tuareg secessionist group, cooperated with and was later coopted by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar al-Din, eventually seizing territory the size of Texas in northern Mali in April 2012.

One highly influential strategist on the Islamic State -- Abu Bakr Naji, who wrote "The Management of Savagery" -- recognized that tribes can be a conduit for territorial control. ISL too has long recognized the potential to further radicalize tribes in the south: in Spring 2015, the group began posting separate videos of ISL fighters from two different tribes (the Tuareg and Tebu) calling on their brethren to join the "caliphate." As for Arab factions, ISL has already made inroads with the Qadhafa tribe, to which Muammar Qadhafi and many former regime officials belonged. Similar to how the Islamic State relied on former Baathist officials in Iraq, ISL has tapped into discontent throughout the Qadhafa stronghold of Sirte, and may yet seek to penetrate southern cities where pro-Qadhafi tribes have a presence. Moreover, Misratan forces and their Awlad Suleiman tribal allies in Sebha have fought the Qadhafa and Magarha tribes before, and the Misratans' leading role in ejecting ISL from Sirte could make them the group's number-one target in the south.

## **VEOS, MILITIAS, AND FRACTURED POLITICS**

**B**eyond ISL, Libya has several significant al-Qaeda-associated VEOs and hardline Islamist militias to contend with. In fact, degrading ISL could allow other jihadist groups to reemerge in their competition for dominance in North Africa, and removing ISL from the Sirte area could spur renewed militia infighting.

In the eastern Cyrenaica province, Gen. Khalifa Haftar and his LNA forces have officially been combating VEOs and hardline Islamist rebels since May 2014. Today, the fighting is concentrated in Benghazi's western neighborhoods of Guarsha, Gar Younes, Sabri, and Suq al-Hawt, where ISL still has a presence, but also in Darnah and Ajdabiya. Non-

ISL VEOs in Cyrenaica include:

- Ansar al-Sharia Libya (AAS)
- Elements from AQIM
- The Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC), which may now operate under the Defense Brigade of Benghazi (DBB)
- The Darnah Revolutionaries Shura Council (DRSC)
- The Ajdabiya Revolutionaries Shura Council (ARSC), which may now operate under the Operations Room for Ajdabiya Liberation and Support for Benghazi Revolutionaries.

In general, Tripolitania-based Islamists oppose Haftar and profess their support for many of these groups. The Tripoli-based National Salvation Government, hardline Sheikh Sadiq al-Gharyani's Libyan Fatwa Council, and various AQIM leaders, including Sheikh Abu Obayda Yusuf al-Anabi, have called for defending Benghazi. In praising Misratah for combating ISL, Gharyani stated that "the battle that will decide the fate of Libya after Sirte is the Battle for Benghazi." He has praised the ARSC and the BRSC, while the DRSC has praised Gharyani, the DBB, and forces in Ajdabiya.

For their part, Misratan forces are allied with Tripoli-based Islamists and also oppose Haftar. Once ISL is dispersed from Sirte, control of the city and surrounding oil infrastructure could be contested by Misratan forces and the LNA, which seized oil fields around al-Jufrah in mid-May. Misratan and LNA forces clashed near Zilla a month later. The head of the Petroleum Facilities Guard, Ibrahim al-Jathran, was an expedient ally of Haftar but accused him of invading the oil fields.

Political stalemate could continue after ISL is ejected from Sirte. Haftar's LNA and associated House of Representatives in Tobruk have opposed joining the Tripoli-based GNA. The GNA is supported by Western powers as the unifying body through which Libya's arms embargo may be lifted, and it is nominally in charge of Operation Solid Structure. On July 1, four GNA members from the east resigned, likely under pressure from Haftar and his allies. If the battle to deny ISL its North Africa capital cannot unify the country's three governments into one, then it is unclear what will (Libya's political challenges will be discussed in greater depth in a soon-to-be-published PolicyWatch by Ben Fishman).

## CONCLUSION

**D**egrading ISL is a step toward stabilizing Libya, but it is no panacea. ISL is dynamic and can change its tactics to shift its focus elsewhere. Beyond the battlefield, Libyan politics remain stalemated. Complete eradication of ISL would merely rewind the clock to fall 2014, when Libya was in the throes of civil war. And achieving a unity government would merely represent a return to the days of the feckless General National Congress, which precipitated the war. In neither period of time could Libya be considered stable.

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