

The Islamic State's Burgeoning Capital in Sirte, Libya

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Brief Analysis

Although ISL lost in Darnah, it has emerged even stronger in Sirte by building on existing jihadist networks in the area and ramping up its state-building activities.

While much of the focus on the Islamic State in Libya (ISL) has centered on its mid-June defeat in Darnah, over the past few months it has slowly built up its assets and capabilities in the country's Sirte district. In many ways, this effort is the first example of ISL fully resembling its ISIS parent in Iraq and Syria. Unlike in Darnah, where ISL originated, no other insurgent factions remain in Sirte to compete with the group. This is due to several developments: defections from the local wing of jihadist group Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL), arrangements ISL has made with local tribes, and ex-Qadhafi loyalists from the late leader's hometown joining up with or acquiescing to ISL's rise in Sirte, in a manner similar to ex-Baathists in Iraq. As a result, Sirte could soon become the capital for ISL, equivalent to Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq.

ASL LAID THE GROUNDWORK IN SIRTE

Because ISL co-opted the ASL network in Sirte, convincing it to pledge *baya* (allegiance) to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in late fall 2014, it did not have to start from scratch when establishing itself in the area. Sirte was the first city in which ASL operated outside its base in Benghazi, beginning in late June 2013. For example, it put on a Quranic competition for Ramadan in July 2013, in association with the local Office of Awqaf, Radio Tawhid, the Cleaning Services Company, and the University of Sirte; a year later, it cosponsored a Ramadan *dawa* event with al-Baynah Foundation. This illustrated that ASL had been preparing to establish itself in Sirte ahead of time and had ties to key players within the city.

From that point forward, Sirte became ASL's second-busiest hub. The group was involved in a variety of governance,

hisba (accountability), and *dawa* (proselytizing) activities in the area, at times extending them into other parts of the Gulf of Sidra region such as al-Nawfaliyah and Bin Jawad. On the governance front, ASL provided security patrols in various neighborhoods and the University of Sirte, helped arbitrate issues between tribes and clans (including some from faraway Misratah), returned a stolen ambulance to a hospital, regulated traffic, and cleaned roads, among other things. In terms of *hisba* -- the system by which an Islamic "state" is entrusted with commanding right and forbidding wrong -- the group implemented the *tazir* penalty (i.e., corporal and other punishments left to the discretion of the authorities, as distinct from punishments set by the Quran) and confiscated and destroyed drugs, cigarettes, and alcohol. It was also involved in providing *iftar* (breaking of the fast) tents and supplying presents to children during Ramadan, as well as giving lessons on how to circumambulate the Kaaba correctly during the Hajj in Mecca, passing out slaughtered sacrificial animals during Eid al-Adha, providing school supplies at the beginning of the school year, converting foreign workers to Islam, and conducting charity drives for needy families.

All of this illustrates that when ISL began moving into Sirte, there was already a strong apparatus in place to exploit. The city now provides the perfect environment for ISL to build itself up in Libya.

ISL EXPANDS IN SIRTE DISTRICT

ISL originated in Darnah in April 2014, when it called itself Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam. After the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade (former members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group) kicked the group out of Darnah in mid-June 2015, Sirte became the main priority for its state-building enterprise. Yet ISL had already been building up its presence in Sirte and other key cities in the district, including al-Nawfaliyah and Harawa. The group drew support from ASL defectors in Sirte as early as October 2014, but it did not act publicly inside the city until early January, from its base at the Ouagadougou Conference Center. Sirte was also the site where ISL members murdered Egyptian Christians in mid-February and Ethiopian Christians in mid-April.

ISL's campaign to seize full control of Sirte was jumpstarted on February 8, 2015, when it took over al-Nawfaliyah some ninety miles to the east. Apparently, ASL defectors provided logistical support for ISL members to enter the city; after securing it, ISL called for residents to pledge *baya* to Baghdadi and named Ali Qarqa (a.k.a. Abu Hamam al-Libi) as the town's new leader. This provided the group with its first true base in the broader Sirte district. Since then, it has focused on numerous activities in al-Nawfaliyah: conducting outreach forums; destroying cigarettes, alcohol, and caches of what ISL deems "sorcery materials"; distributing *dawa* leaflets; and training new soldiers.

The week after the al-Nawfaliyah takeover, ISL began making bolder moves in Sirte city, taking the radio station, the Wataniya television studio, the immigration center, Ibn Sina Hospital, the University of Sirte, and local government buildings. By then it controlled more than half of the city and had installed a local leader: Usamah Karamah, a relative of a former senior Qadhafi intelligence officer. This led the Misratan faction called the Fajr 166 Brigade to launch a counter-campaign aimed at retaking the city, but the effort failed because many leaders back in Misratah were incredulous at the time that ISL had actually infiltrated Sirte and viewed the fight with Gen. Khalifa Haftar in the east as a higher priority. In late May, ISL seized al-Qardabiya Air Base and the Great Man-Made River irrigation complex; then, on June 9, it took the city's power plant, giving it complete control of Sirte. Afterward, ISL members began to loot and destroy the homes of local politicians.

The next week, ISL took over Harawa, halfway between Sirte and al-Nawfaliyah. This move consolidated the group's hold over a swath of territory stretching around 125 miles. ISL has shown little sign of governance activities in Harawa so far, focusing instead on handing out *dawa* leaflets and CDs, destroying cigarettes and other items the group deems *haram* (forbidden), distributing *zakat al-fitr* (charity given to the poor at the end of Ramadan), allegedly liberating a number of Egyptian Muslim prisoners kidnapped by "corrupted" bandits, and in one case arresting a thief.

ISL has also taken other towns such as al-Wushka (about sixty-five miles west of Sirte city) and Wadi Zamzam (105 miles west). The latter town extends into Misratah district, suggesting that wider fighting could emerge between ISL and the Misratans -- thus far they have only issued empty threats against ISL.

STATE-BUILDING IN SIRTE CITY

ISL's operations in Sirte have grown more sophisticated since June, surpassing even its original efforts in Darnah -- a situation abetted by its current lack of competition. Prior to June, the vast majority of its activities were limited to *dawa* and *hisba*: distributing literature, conducting forums, converting Christians, implementing *tazir* and *hudoud* (punishments for crimes against God that are based on the Quran and hadith, such as flogging, stoning, amputation, and execution), and demolishing shrines, among other activities described above.

After ISL's Darnah defeat and Sirte expansion, many members went west to help consolidate the group's control and governance efforts there. Although it still engages in *dawa* and *hisba*, ISL is now in the state-building stage -- it aims to show residents that life is continuing and that its presence has brought normalcy and stability. Similar efforts were seen last fall in Iraq and Syria, where ISIS members ostentatiously placed the group's black flag on lamp posts, erected *dawa* billboards throughout towns, conducted tours of different industries, highlighted the group's public works projects, and publicized photos showing the beauty and peacefulness of life in the so-called "Caliphate." Likewise, ISL members in Sirte have shown off the city's landscapes, port, bustling markets, and fully stocked grocery stores. They have also decorated the entrance to the city with ISL flags, installed numerous *dawa* billboards, cleaned and decorated streets, provided *zakat* to the needy, visited Ibn Sina hospital, and toured local brick, aluminum, marble, and milk factories.

In another parallel to Iraq and Syria, ISL members have called on individuals to join the group's ranks via video messages issued under the aegis of "Wilayat Tarabulus," the so-called ISIS "province" encompassing northwestern Libya. In late January, Abu Umar al-Tawrigi called on his fellow Tuaregs to join the group and pledge *baya* to Baghdadi. In late April, Abu Muhammad al-Ansari stated, "Come to Libya. Our hearts and homes are open to you." In early June, Abu Dujana al-Sudani urged potential recruits to make *hijra* (emigrate) to ISL. And last month, Abu Hamza al-Masri reiterated these entreaties, asking legal scholars in particular to come help the group implement sharia.

CONCLUSION

ISL's seizure of Sirte has given the Islamic State a more sustainable base than its failed attempts in Darnah, as well as its first capital outside Iraq and Syria. Whether this leads to further territorial gains remains to be seen, especially given the various rivalries and areas of influence among Libya's many factions. But ISL will become a far more formidable force if it is able to link its territory in Sirte district to the central Jufrah district, which has the Mabruk oil field and the town of Waddan -- a key supply line for Fajr between Misratah and Sebha districts and a pivotal crossroads for various criminal networks that ISL hopes to take over. The group is also attempting to co-opt more pro-Qadhafi tribes in the Fezzan region further south.

Meanwhile, ISL's consolidation has led ASL -- which still operates independently in Benghazi and to a lesser extent Ajdabiya and Darnah -- to focus more on service provision, dispensing justice, and security. This could lead to an eventual bidding war between the two rival jihadist groups. Whatever the case, it is important for U.S. policymakers and other parties to understand that while ISL did indeed lose in Darnah, it has emerged even stronger in Sirte.

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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