

The Islamic State's Expansion in Libya

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Feb 11, 2015

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Brief Analysis

While some debate the group's true extent in Libya, ISIS has aggressively expanded its physical and media presence to intimidate its foes, coopt other jihadist groups, and attract recruits.

To read a fully sourced version of this article with footnote citations for the numerous quotes from ISIS supporters, download the PDF.

Earlier this month, Aref Ali Nayed -- Libya's ambassador to the UAE and former lead coordinator of the Libya Stabilization Team -- visited Washington to address the "Islamic State"/ISIS presence in his country. In his view, the group is rapidly expanding and may threaten Europe, though the U.S. government assessment is less certain -- some American intelligence officials believe Nayed may be overstating his case, but U.S. ambassador to Libya Deborah Jones asked in a February 4 tweet whether "a divided Libya" can withstand ISIS. Indeed, the group has dramatically increased its physical and media presence in Libya since the Islamic Youth Shura Council (IYSC) of Darnah pledged allegiance to it last October, after which ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi recognized the Libyan "provinces" of Barqa (Cyrenaica), Tripolitania, and Fezzan as belonging to his self-styled "caliphate." At the same time, the group's supporters online have been aggressively recruiting while making the case for ISIS expansion in Libya and a new strategy in North Africa.

OPPOSING AGENDAS

Nayed is affiliated with the House of Representatives (HOR) in Tobruk, a body that has broadly labeled Islamists in Libya as "terrorists" and has an interest in inflating this threat -- similar to Gen. Khalifa Haftar's "Operation Dignity," a campaign that has treated extremists and political Islamists alike as terrorists. Conversely, the HOR's opponents in Tripoli -- the Islamist and hardline-revolutionary-controlled General National Congress (GNC) and the militia alliance known as "Operation Libya Dawn" -- are downplaying the threat. For example, the prime minister in Tripoli, Omar al-Hassi, and the Libyan Revolutionaries Operations Room militia have denied an ISIS connection to

the January 27 attack on Tripoli's Corinthia Hotel.

The more convinced outside powers become of a menacing ISIS presence in Libya, the more likely they will intervene on behalf of those who have a record of battling extremists. Thus far, Operation Dignity forces have been engaged in urban warfare with the more extreme elements loosely affiliated with Libya Dawn, such as Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL).

ISIS ACTIVITIES IN LIBYA

At the very least, ISIS has left its footprints in Benghazi, Sirte, Tripoli, and portions of southern Libya. The group has broadcast very little from its media office for "Fezzan Province," though it did claim responsibility for the January 3 attack on a Libyan army checkpoint outside of Soukna that left over ten soldiers dead. ISIS media offices for Barqa and Tripolitania are much more active in broadcasting "soft" activities such as *hisba* (religious accountability) and *dawa* (proselytizing), in tandem with "hard" security- and violence-related content.

In Barqa, ISIS activities extend far beyond what has been written on Darnah. The group has publicized *hisba* activities such as burning cigarette cartons; destroying waterpipes used for smoking; demolishing "polytheistic" statues and shrines; and persuading Muslims in open-air markets to leave their commercial activities and join them at the mosque (more coercive measures are used in Syria and Iraq). Its *dawa* activities have included distributing "medical guidance" in Cyrenaica, general aid to the needy, and sweets and gifts to children in Benghazi. "Harder" ISIS activities in Barqa have included the execution of two Tunisian journalists, street fighting in Benghazi, and gunfights, rocket fire, and guerrilla activities in Ain Mara.

In addition to targeting General Haftar and his forces, ISIS counterpropaganda also singles out the Sahwat (Awakening), a group of irregular forces fighting alongside Operation Dignity who are named after the Sunni tribal "awakening" against al-Qaeda in Anbar, Iraq, where ISIS has its roots. The Libyan Sahwat were likely organized as a parallel counterinsurgency force for Operation Dignity after ASL and its allies routed Haftar from Benghazi in July 2014; they became well known during the October counteroffensive. ISIS photo essays have since attempted to blame Benghazi's destruction on Haftar and the Sahwat, whom the jihadist writer Abu Moaz al-Barqawi (i.e., "of Barqa") described as an "awakening of apostasy."

In Tripoli, ISIS has benefited from the relative calm to conduct more relaxed *dawa* activities such as "meet and greets" and distributions of cash and clothing. But the most immediate threat to Tripoli's calm is ISIS itself: the group has claimed credit for a spate of attacks targeting foreign symbols, including a diplomatic security building, the Algerian embassy, and the Corinthia Hotel. Reports of gun battles against Islamist militias backing the GNC fit with ISIS propaganda that undercuts political Islamists. ISIS supporters such as blogger Gharib al-Ikhwan have also pushed the anti-Dawn slogan "Dawn of Truth, not Libya Dawn."

COMPETING FOR THE MANTLE OF JIHAD IN LIBYA

A consensus is emerging that ISIS is attracting members from ASL (see "[The Islamic State's Model](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-model)," *Washington Post* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-model>)). This attraction is likely due to the group's successes in the Eastern Mediterranean and rapid expansion in Libya, while Operation Dignity's slow and grinding counterassault has put ASL under pressure.

The competition appears to mirror jihadist dynamics in Syria and Iraq, where al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra has lost ground and fighters to the more extreme ISIS. While ASL's position vis-a-vis ISIS and al-Qaeda is not entirely clear, a growing number of online activists advocating for ISIS in Libya have been speaking of the two organizations as one and the same, praising their fighters but arguing that it is time for them to join the caliphate. Ikhwan, for example, posted a treatise penned "to the soldiers of al-Qaeda in Libya" and published a graphic titled "Libya...lose the opportunity or pledge allegiance to Ibrahim's caliphate." Similarly, Barqawi wrote an argument at the end of

January titled "No organization (*tanzim*, a likely reference to al-Qaeda) in the shadow of the (Islamic) State," where he posed the question, "Why are you, o soldiers of Ansar al-Sharia, delaying in this imperative duty to pledge allegiance to Ibrahim's caliphate?" He also made the direct claim that ASL is "a branch of al-Qaeda in Libya" -- indeed, the State Department has designated the group for its ties to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the UN has put the group on its al-Qaeda sanctions list.

Another ISIS partisan simultaneously praised ASL while calling for it to join the Islamic State, claiming that this is what ASL's foot soldiers desire; he also pilloried ASL's alliances and al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Another commenter invoked the IYSC's example, emphasizing that "to follow in the steps of their brothers in Darnah is a move no less important than taking Mosul and its aftermath."

TOWARD AN ISIS GRAND STRATEGY?

Pro-ISIS activists have also made strategic-level arguments for expansion. For example, Abu Irhim al-Libi called Libya "a strategic portal for the Islamic State" and said that "some may not realize the size of Libya, the spread of various weapons...Libya overlooks the sea, desert, and mountains, [in addition to] Egypt, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Algeria, and Tunisia.

Barqawi took this argument a step further in a post titled "Come to the fold of the caliphate," declaring that ISIS seeks to eliminate the Tunisian, Libyan, and Egyptian borders; he cited the creation of the "Euphrates Province" conjoining towns in Syria and Iraq as a precedent. Similarly, Ikhwan urged jihadist leaders in Libya "to emulate their brethren in Darnah" so as to "create a western front that will meet their brothers in Ansar Beit al-Maqdis," an ISIS affiliate in the Sinai Peninsula. He added "and God willing they will be at the western gates to liberate Palestine."

Others have argued that ISIS expansion in Libya would reduce pressure on the group in the Eastern Mediterranean. A Sunni jihadist takeover in Libya would also counterbalance the loss of Yemen to the Houthis, who are Zaidi Shiites connected to Iran.

CHALLENGES

One of the greatest obstacles to countering ISIS in Libya is finding the resources and will to organize a strategy and partners. This is especially true given the priority that Washington and others have assigned to fighting the group in Iraq and Syria. Going forward, any policy decision on what to do in Libya should be based on an accurate understanding of the changing extremist landscape. While General Haftar and the HOR have an incentive to inflate the threat, their motives do not negate the general, disturbing trend outlined above. If concerned parties focus too much on debating the Islamic State's true extent in Libya, they will overlook the group's steady increase in soft and hard activities, including its worrisome efforts to recruit seasoned fighters from ASL. Even if the ISIS militant presence on the ground is limited at the moment, the group's supporters are laying the foundation for a long-term strategy in Libya and the rest of North Africa.

Andrew Engel is an Africa analyst and author of The Washington Institute study ["Libya as a Failed State: Causes, Consequences, Options."](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/libya-as-a-failed-state-causes-consequences-options) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/libya-as-a-failed-state-causes-consequences-options>) He traveled across Libya after its official liberation. ❖

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