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The Islamic State's First Colony in Libya

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Brief Analysis

A local jihadist group has claimed a Libyan city in the name of ISIS, showing how the "Islamic State" could flout traditional notions of territorial contiguity by expanding its "borders" well beyond Iraq and Syria.

As the Islamic State/ISIS continues its offensives in Iraq and Syria, it is steadily gaining support from individuals and groups around the world. Most significantly, a relatively new global jihadist group in Libya -- Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam (the Islamic Youth Shura Council), or MSSSI -- announced last weekend that its claimed territory in the city of Darnah was now part of the ISIS "caliphate." Although ISIS leaders have not commented on this proclamation or formally "annexed" this land into the Islamic State, MSSSI's move suggests a potential future approach to expansion that differs from al-Qaeda's franchising model. It could also illustrate how national borders and contiguous landmass may be irrelevant to how ISIS will grow its caliphate beyond the Levant and Mesopotamia.

WHO IS MAJLIS SHURA SHABAB AL-ISLAM?

MSSI publicly announced its existence on April 4, when masked members of the group took to the streets of Darnah, a city of 80,000 on the Mediterranean coast about 150 miles east of Benghazi. Wearing military uniforms, driving pickup trucks, and brandishing rocket-propelled grenade launchers, machine guns, and anti-aircraft cannons, they declared that they would be the city's new security force and would institute sharia (Islamic law). To be sure, MSSSI is not the only rebel force in Darnah, nor has it been able to monopolize the city's affairs since April. Yet while little is known about its individual leaders and members, the group has clearly attempted to follow through on its original message.

On May 13, MSSSI began conducting security patrols in parts of Darnah, and by mid-August it had taken control of al-Huraysh Hospital -- akin to how another jihadist faction, Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, provided security for al-Jala Hospital in Benghazi, which won the group goodwill after many civilians turned against it following the 2012 attack on the American consulate. Moreover, on May 18, MSSSI began filling its official Facebook page with statements from its sharia committee about individuals -- including members of the "apostate" Libyan government, other rebel forces, and random citizens -- who had "repented" and joined the group, a tactic also used by ISIS. Since then, as many as a hundred or more such individuals have been publicized. In addition, many MSSSI members took to the streets on August 12 to demonstrate for the institution of sharia, while the sharia committee published an antidemocratic treatise online on August 20.

Meanwhile, MSSSI began to conduct *hisba* (accountability) within Darnah, essentially calling individuals to account for their "non-Islamic" behavior, sometimes through vigilantism. For example, on June 1 and August 30, the group's social media pages highlighted how it had confiscated drugs and alcohol. The group also instituted *hudoud* (criminal punishments under sharia) in mid-July, going so far as to perform a Taliban-esque public execution at a soccer stadium on August 18. These actions have given MSSSI a negative reputation among some of the populace, but also instilled deep fear.

MSSSI AND THE ISLAMIC STATE

Along with using ISIS iconography, most notably the group's black flag, MSSSI also released a statement on June 22 showing its support for the Islamic State and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: "It is incumbent on us to support this oppressed Islamic State that is taken as an enemy by those near and those far, among the *kuffar* (infidels) or the *munafiqin* (hypocrites) or those with *marda al-nafous* (deceased souls) alike." The statement continued: "*fa-dawlat al-Islam baqiyah* (so the Islamic State shall remain) by the will of God because whatever is for God lasts, and what is for other than Him falls apart."

This statement preceded the formal claim on October 3 that the territory MSSSI controlled in Darnah was now part of the caliphate, refashioning the city as Wilayat Darnah (the province of Darnah) within the Islamic State. The latter claim may have been issued because fifteen ISIS members were allegedly dispatched from Syria to Darnah recently. To celebrate the announcement, MSSSI organized a forum at al-Sahaba Mosque called "*khilafah ala manhaj al-nabawiyah* (the Caliphate upon the methodology of the Prophet)," a slogan used by ISIS in the past year. Hundreds of people took part in the event. In addition to sermons and recreational games for children, the forum showed off the ISIS flag and MSSSI cars with "Islamic police" painted on them; some cars said "*hisba*" on top in bold and "*al-amr bi-l-marouf wa-l-nahi an al-munkr*" (the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice) in smaller text below. The organizers also played *nashid* (religiously sanctioned a cappella music) published by Ajnad Media, an ISIS outlet.

While celebration was in the air, not everyone in Darnah was happy about this turn of events. Along with some local residents, the mainstream rebel faction Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade announced on October 7 that it was displeased with MSSSI's announcement, stating it would never pledge *baya* (religiously binding oath of allegiance) to anyone outside Libya. The two groups are believed to be involved in a turf battle in parts of Darnah that has left many dead and injured in the past few weeks. Such developments cast doubt on the sustainability of MSSSI's project; the group will have to build up further capacities if it wants its province of the "caliphate" to last long term. Yet Darnah's history of ties with jihadist movements in other countries cannot be ignored; for instance, when U.S. troops in Iraq uncovered a list of foreign fighters for the insurgency there in 2007, 52 of the 112 Libyans on the list came from Darnah.

A NEW MODEL?

Despite the lack of public statements from ISIS on the matter, MSSI's gambit in Libya could be a model for future acquisition of territory by the Islamic State beyond its base in Iraq and Syria. Questions remain about the command-and-control capabilities that would be needed to realize such a scenario, as well as the logistics inherent in marshalling widespread foreign fighters and facilitation networks. This model would also diverge sharply from how al-Qaeda has done business in the past, namely, relying primarily on autonomous local franchise organizations.

Whatever comes of MSSI's announcement, it highlights the continuing appeal of ISIS in many parts of the globe beyond Iraq, Syria, and the cadre of foreign fighters in and around those states. Governments worldwide must realize that ISIS cannot be wished away or ignored, and that the movement is not territorially fixed. Rather, the Islamic State seems to be awakening many potential adherents in various corners of the world.

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