

Libya's Jihadists Beyond Benghazi

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Articles & Testimony

The government's total failure to deliver security or basic services has given Ansar al-Sharia in Libya ample room to recover from the backlash that followed last year's consulate attack.

While the security situation continues to worsen in Libya, over the past few months, Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL) has been taking advantage of the lack of state control by building local communal ties, which is strengthening its ability to operate in more locations than Benghazi. Although Benghazans protested against ASL in response to the consulate attack, which led many in the media, commentariat, and government to believe it had been outright discredited, contrary to this narrative that formed that ASL was marginalized and kicked out of the city, in fact, it is thriving and expanding.

Following the September 11 attack, many Libyans, especially in Benghazi, were embarrassed that the operation on the consulate that killed Ambassador Christopher Stevens and other Americans occurred. Many believed Stevens was doing a great job and helping out the local community. As such, citizens went into the streets to repudiate these actions and called for stripping weapons from militias. They also stormed ASL's base. While this might have been a short-term set back, ASL has since been able to alter perceptions of its intentions even if it has not fundamentally changed its ideology.

Unlike Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST), which has been a national movement from its inception, ASL originally only organized and operated in Benghazi. ASL first announced itself in February 2012. The group is led by Muhammad al-Zahawi, who had previously been an inmate of former President Muammar al-Qaddafi's infamous Abu Salim prison. In recent months, though, ASL has been able to expand its scope beyond Benghazi through its *dawa* (missionary work), coordination with local leaders and businesses, and programs that are beneficial locally.

In the aftermath of the consulate attack, a major rebranding began by changing the group's name from Katibat Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi to Ansar al-Sharia in Libya. Though at the time ASL was only active in Benghazi, the

group changed its name to try and signify it was a national movement as well as no longer primarily a fighting force since *katibat* means brigade. ASL also began a rigorous rehabilitation process through focusing on *dawa* activities to garner more support and alter local perceptions.

The use of *dawa* has been a key evolution in jihadi organizations over the past few years. In light of the excesses in Iraq, global jihadi theorists like Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and later al Qaeda ideologues began calling for a more comprehensive program to gain power and then instituting their interpretation of sharia. By focusing on *dawa*, groups would be able to consolidate gains instead of only attacking all types of enemies, which would only lead to short-term gain but not long-term progress. Both ASL and AST have exemplified this change over the past two and a half years.

Although media reports originally suggested that ASL had left Benghazi following the consulate attack, in actuality, it only left its base within the city, but did not leave the city itself. Rather, members melted back in with the population and bided their time. It did not take long for good news to appear for ASL. Only 10 days after the September 11 attack, doctors and nurses at al-Jala' hospital that ASL was guarding (prior to the attack and had been relieved of duties in light of it) highlighted that its services were missed.

Since mid-October 2012, ASL has gradually done more and more outreach and social service type of activities under the rubric of its *dawa* campaign. These activities include religious lecture series for the youth, fixing and cleaning roads, night patrols on the outskirts of Benghazi, confiscating drugs and alcohol, providing slaughtered sheep to needy families for Eid, sending aid to Syria and Gaza, Quranic competitions for children, maintenance of houses of the poor, cleaning schools, garbage collection, and fixing bridges, among other things. Beyond this, ASL has been able to provide tangible services to the community. It has opened a medical clinic for women and children, an Islamic Center for Women, an Emergency Room, as well as a religious school named Mirkaz al-Imam al-Bukhari Li-l-'Ulum al-Sharia.

As a result of these activities and services, it has been able to gain goodwill within society. For instance, the Central Blood Center (CBC) in Benghazi now partners with ASL for urgent blood drives. The CBC even presented ASL with an award for its help on July 25. ASL has also coordinated lectures with the Social Security Fund Benghazi Branch and cleaned roads in cooperation with the group 'Tajama' al-Qawarshah al-Khayri wa-l-Da'wai and the electrical company. Additionally, in January, the administration at the Turkish School called "July 23" asked for help with securing and cleaning it. The administrators claimed that they asked the National Security Directorate, the local council, and the competent authorities to provide security, but they did not. The school had allegedly been taken over and used by some youth who made it a place to sleep, eat, drink, use drugs and liquor, and breed animals.

The most successful project that ASL has undertaken is a vigorous anti-drug campaign in cooperation with the Rehab Clinic at the Psychiatric Hospital of Benghazi, the Ahli Club (soccer), Libya Company (Telecom and Technology), and the Technical Company. This suggests that there is buy-in at a town level. It also highlights the goodwill and positive force some see in ASL for society. Throughout May, ASL put on a lecture series nine times with the slogan "Together For Benghazi Without Drugs." One of the lectures was in Tripoli in cooperation with the Qaduti Foundation, highlighting that ASL's message was gaining positive resonance outside of Benghazi.

Two months earlier, signs of its growth and outreach beyond Benghazi started becoming evident. A delegation of unidentified tribesman from the southern town of Ubari came up to Benghazi. The purpose of this trip according to ASL was for the tribesman to get to know its organization. This potentially hints at more nefarious aims of ASL that it does not publicize. It is believed by French intelligence that al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has had people stay in Ubari. There are also reports that Mukhtar Bilmukhtar, who was responsible for the In Amenas attack in Algeria earlier this year, was working with actors in Ubari as well.

Comparing ASL's two annual conferences can also show the scope of its growth. There was an increase from the first iteration in early June 2012 and the one at the end of June this year. An estimated few hundred members attended ASL's first conference, whereas, around two thousand people were present this year, though ASL claims 12,000 people came.

Other signs of ASL's progress were its establishment of a second branch in Sirte on June 28 and a third branch in Ajdabiya on August 6. Based on the events ASL has put on in Sirte over the past couple of weeks, it shows that it had been preparing for its establishment ahead of time. For instance, ASL put on a Quranic competition for Ramadan between July 14 and 24 in association with the Office of Awqaf of Sirte, Radio Tawhid of Sirte, the Cleaning Services Company, and the University of Sirte.

During Ramadan, ASL has also been assisting needy families with food for Iftar in Benghazi. It has been able to garner sponsorship of this drive from the Libya Company, Primera Gallery, al-Iman Foundation, Tajama' al-Qawarshah al-Khayri wa-l-Da'wai, and the Faruq Center. As such, it has allowed ASL to provide clothing and gifts to children on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr at the end of the month of Ramadan.

All of this points to ASL expanding in capacity, contradicting some analysis that it was wholly discredited and destroyed in the demonstrations in Benghazi in the aftermath of the U.S. Consulate attack. ASL's overall influence should not be exaggerated or overblown, though. It is still a fringe movement, but similar to the group in Tunisia it is able to punch above its weight through public events and posting them onto its official Facebook pages. But unlike AST, which has only independently put on campaigns and events, ASL has been able to integrate within the local milieu beyond just its membership. This is in part precisely because of the total failure of the central government to deliver security or basic services. With the social service provisions and local cooperation, ASL will continue to expand and be an actor that cannot be ignored.

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