



RESEARCH NOTES

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LIBYA'S CIVIL WAR

Rebuilding the Country from the Ground Up

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Libya's postrevolutionary transition to democracy has been completely upended by civil war and the extension of the so-called Islamic State to Libyan lands.¹ The country's disintegration has been referred to as "the Middle East's second war zone"² and "a war to watch in 2015."³ An estimated 2 million Libyans out of a population of 6.2 million have been affected by the escalation in fighting—with at least 454,000 Libyans displaced since November 2014,⁴ some for the fourth or fifth time⁵—exacerbating an already untenable humanitarian crisis.

Meanwhile, violent extremist organizations (VEOs), including the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which now claims the Islamic State in Libya (ISL) as part of its caliphate, continue to expand throughout the country's three provinces of Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, and Fezzan. Jonathan Powell, the British special envoy to Libya, described the country on January 14 as "a honey pot" for VEOs such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and even Boko Haram,⁶ which on March 7 pledged allegiance to ISIS.⁷ The deadly March 18 attack against the Bardo National Museum in Tunis by ISIS gunmen trained in ISL territory underscores the VEO threat to the region emanating from the country.⁸ It is therefore no surprise that Bernardino

León, the head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), has warned that Libya is "very close to total chaos"⁹ and that the country is increasingly being compared to "a Somalia"¹⁰ or "Mosul"¹¹ on the Mediterranean.

The central argument of this paper is that UNSMIL's current top-down approach in pursuit of a unity government—backed by the European Union and the United States—will prove unable to deliver stability. Worse, it could further fan the conflagration, given that the UN Security Council could loosen its arms embargo in the event a unity government is formed,¹² allowing more weapons to enter a country already oversaturated with them. The situation could also be aggravated by the arrival of EU member country troops to Libya to back a unity government.¹³ Weapons delivered to a central government lacking official armed forces could be diverted to the various armed groups that have, since 2011, undermined the emergence of a strong unity government in the first place. An influx of weapons to Libya could also exacerbate terrorism-related security challenges facing Libya's neighbors.¹⁴ The presence of foreign soldiers in Libya to protect government buildings and infrastructure would directly support VEO recruitment

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efforts, and could very well end in a “Black Hawk Down” scenario. Furthermore, the fragility and factionalism within Libya’s warring coalitions puts into question whether these groups could ever be brought under a “big tent,” with hardline spoilers threatening to undermine any unity government agreement.

A bottom-up approach to Libya’s civil war that engages power brokers at the local level—local armed forces, tribes, shura councils, and municipal councils—best accords with the reality of power dynamics in Libya. Such a piecemeal approach is certainly difficult, complicated, and time intensive, not unlike assembling a puzzle. But a patchwork of successes holds greater promise than any politically expedient top-down approach.

The study proceeds in four parts. The first addresses the various actors driving instability in Libya—that is, the components that constitute Operation Dignity and Operation Libya Dawn—and fissures within the respective military-political alliances. The second part provides an overview of Libya’s VEO landscape, and how ISL is both driving and benefiting from polarization of the country’s jihadist milieu. The third part provides a battlefield update for each of Libya’s four active fronts, including risks to Libya’s hydrocarbon wealth. Fourth and finally, the study turns to existing efforts to bring about a negotiated settlement, and recommendations for a course of action.

■ Greater Violence and Fragmentation

Two competing military-political alliances are at the heart of Libya’s cleavage. Based primarily in the east is Operation Dignity, led by Gen. Khalifa Haftar and consisting of remnants of the armed forces within the Libyan National Army (LNA), along with irregular and tribal forces. Zintani brigades in the western Nafusa Mountains also operate under the banner of Operation Dignity. The political elements consist of the elected and internationally recognized House of Representatives (HOR) in Tobruk, which is led by its speaker, Aguila Saleh Essa, and the government of Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thini in Bayda. In opposition is Operation Dawn, primarily in the west, consisting of a rump parliament from the country’s

last General National Congress (GNC) that was reinstated in August 2014 and is still led by Nuri Abu Sahmain and, until recently, the “National Salvation Government” of Prime Minister Omar al-Hassi in Tripoli. Hassi was dismissed by the GNC and his ministers for poor leadership on the economy, and was replaced by his deputy, Khalifa Ghwell, also an Islamist.¹⁵ Broadly speaking, Operation Dignity consists of traditional Arab nationalists, federalists, anti-Islamists, and former regime elements, while Operation Dawn comprises a loose coalition of hardline revolutionaries, Islamists, and Amazigh in the north-west. Each alliance outwardly exhibits the impression of unified command and control, but there is tension and diffusion among their many parts.

Libya’s crisis reflects broader regional tensions and conflicts¹⁶ and, as such, has been subject to varying types of foreign intervention. States advocating political Islam, such as Qatar, Turkey, and Sudan, support factions within Operation Dawn, and their regional and ideological competitors, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and in particular Egypt, support factions of Operation Dignity, which also receives backing from Russia.¹⁷ VEOs such as ISL receive outside support in the form of foreign fighters, the likely smuggling of weapons and goods, and propaganda that drives recruitment and *hijra* (immigration) to caliphate territory in Libya. The growth of ISL increases the likelihood of additional direct foreign interventions, as requested by neighbors such as Mali¹⁸ and Chad,¹⁹ or along the lines of Egypt’s February 16 bombing of Darnah in response to ISL’s killing of twenty Egyptian Coptic Christians and one other Christian, a video of which was released February 15.²⁰ Indeed, Thini reportedly called for the Arab League’s newly created joint force, now intervening in Yemen, to intervene on his side in Libya.²¹

Operations Dawn and Dignity have both contributed to escalating violence. Indiscriminate shelling and human rights abuses have reportedly occurred on all fronts,²² including through the use of cluster munitions,²³ most probably from Operation Dignity forces.²⁴ Dignity has capitalized on its relative aerial superiority over Dawn to conduct airstrikes along Libya’s coastline, with some dozen MiG-23s, L-39s,

numerous helicopters,²⁵ and three new MiG-21s delivered to the Libyan Air Force (LAF) from Egypt.²⁶ In contrast, Dawn forces have just two²⁷ or three²⁸ aircraft that have been used in attacks against Zintani forces, and one was recently shot down near Zintan with a man-portable air-defense system (MANPAD) on March 23.²⁹ Dawn jets have also bombed the Dignity-aligned Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) at the oil export terminals of Ras Lanuf and al-Sidra in the Gulf of Sirte.³⁰ As Libyan national identity continues to devolve to the level of region, tribe, and town,³¹ violence has also become more intimate,³² especially in Benghazi, Darnah, the Nafusa Mountains, and the country's southwest. In Benghazi, for example, residents with ties to Tripolitania—particularly those from Misratah—are being targeted and forced out of the city. The Laithi district in particular has seen an exodus of families to Misratah. Hardline federalists seeking greater autonomy or even independence for Cyrenaica may have an interest in seeing the conflict continue in order drive out of Cyrenaica those with roots in Tripolitania, deepening east and west divisions.³³ Finally, ISL, like its namesake in Syria and Iraq, is pursuing tactics deemed too extreme by its Libyan rivals within the orbit of the al-Qaeda trend, and conflict between the two sides is escalating.

Operation Dignity

Haftar launched Operation Dignity on May 16, 2014, and was joined by most of the LAF, remnants of the navy, and al-Saiqa Special Forces. The operation was initiated in response to a widespread and increasingly deadly unconventional warfare campaign blamed on Islamist extremists that began shortly after the start of Libya's transitional period, one in which some fifty people were assassinated per month in early 2014—or, by some accounts, up to five hundred people were killed by May 2014.³⁴ Violence has been heavily concentrated in Cyrenaica, and includes among its victims those associated with civil society, the judicial system, and security services.³⁵ But Haftar and later the HOR expanded their “war on terrorism” to include all Islamists in Libya, including the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Misratah, thereby

ensuring unity among their enemies who might not otherwise have found common ground. By August 25, 2014, Haftar had nominally integrated his forces under the command of Army chief of staff Abdul Razzaq Nazuri,³⁶ who was appointed by the HOR,³⁷ achieving the appearance of unity of effort.

Speaking to a pro-Operation Dignity news outlet on November 3, 2014, Operation Dignity commander Faraj al-Barassi estimated that some 80 percent of Dignity fighters are regular armed service members.³⁸ However, a video made public on March 1 shows Barassi telling an audience that “the percentage of soldiers actually fighting in the battlefield does not exceed fifteen to twenty percent. The rest are policemen, civilians, and volunteers.”³⁹ A UN Security Council panel of experts wrote on February 23 that the LNA, from May to August 2014, “could not be considered to represent an ‘official army’ any more than could their opponents.”⁴⁰ Command and control is also unclear. The al-Saiqa Special Forces in Benghazi are reportedly more loyal to Thini than to Haftar,⁴¹ while forces in the west, such as the powerful Zintani brigades and their allies in the Warshefana tribe,⁴² and federalists in the Gulf of Sirte, such as Ibrahim al-Jathran's PFG, have resisted taking direct orders from Operation Dignity leadership.⁴³ The Zintanis seem wary of Haftar's ambitions, while the federalists oppose the centralized state sought by Haftar and Thini; al-Saiqa⁴⁴ and PFG⁴⁵ forces have reportedly complained that Haftar has marginalized their forces by not providing adequate arms and ammunition. Nonetheless, the Thini government's Ministry of Interior has reportedly tried to bring the PFG within its chain of command⁴⁶ in a possible bid to further legitimize its control of hydrocarbon resources.

While Haftar is the personality driving much of Operation Dignity, his official position has long been ambiguous and left to HOR debate.⁴⁷ Elements within the HOR are reportedly wary of Haftar and his backers, a situation that compelled the HOR speaker to unilaterally reinstate 127 former Muammar Qadhafi-era officers on January 19 and make Haftar's role in the army official.⁴⁸ The move did not, however, clarify Haftar's ultimate standing within the armed forces,⁴⁹

which remained uncertain until March 9, when he was sworn in to the rank of lieutenant general and formal leadership of the LNA at a ceremony in Bayda.⁵⁰

There is considerable tension between Haftar and the Bayda-based Thini government. On January 5, Nazuri ordered the arrest of Col. Masoud Rahouma, Thini's minister of defense, over weapons shipments being carried out without his or Haftar's knowledge.⁵¹ On February 1, soldiers loyal to Haftar blocked Thini's arrival to Benghazi, and while Haftar denied the incident, his spokesman, Muhammad al-Hejazi, accused Thini of not asking for permission to visit. Hejazi, by claiming that Thini's "meeting with the commanders of the frontline was not his business,"⁵² demonstrated the gross absence of civilian oversight. Even greater tension emerged in this alliance when Interior Minister Omar al-Sinki, from Misratah, called Haftar a dictator and claimed he had told him he seeks the presidency; Thini fired Sinki on February 10, but he refused to step down.⁵³

This lack of clarity over Haftar's role in Operation Dignity, and ultimately his personal ambitions, has not only been a source of discord in the military-political alliance but is also a principal grievance narrative cited by Operation Dawn and extremists alike. This general unease extends beyond Haftar to Egypt. The decision to label Libya's Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization reflects the hardline stance of Operation Dignity's Egyptian backer, President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi. Indeed, after his HOR-sanctioned return to the armed forces, Haftar reaffirmed that "my basic task is to cleanse Libya of the Muslim Brotherhood,"⁵⁴ just as Sisi has pledged that the Brotherhood would not exist under his presidency.⁵⁵ Regarding the continuing UNSMIL negotiations, Haftar more recently pledged that "there will be no dialogue with terrorism."⁵⁶ It is therefore no surprise that the Muslim Brotherhood has accused Haftar of walking "in the footsteps of Sisi."⁵⁷ Just as Sisi expressed disinterest in running for president as a general,⁵⁸ Haftar had claimed he had no interest in power;⁵⁹ Sisi has since become president, and Haftar claims he would run for president if the people desire it.⁶⁰ (Some Operation Dignity elements in the west are also skeptical toward negotiations: on March 8,

Zintan's Abdullah Ahmed Naker, former head of the Tripoli Revolutionists Council and head of the Summit Party, decried the talks as the product of "American and British agendas."⁶¹)

Cooperation between Egypt and Operation Dignity is close. The HOR deputy prime minister has stated that "Egypt is a natural extension of Libya, and vice-versa."⁶² In acting on this mentality, Egypt is even reportedly connecting parts of eastern Libya to its electrical grid.⁶³ Egypt has a vested economic interest in Libya, particularly in providing opportunities to its own cheap labor force.⁶⁴ The growth of ISL is furthering Egypt-Dignity cooperation: after the announcement of ISL's abduction of Egyptian Coptic Christians, Egypt's Central Intelligence Division agreed to train two thousand Libyans to confront terrorism.⁶⁵ While strong outside support from Egypt will assist Haftar in his battle against the likes of ISL, it could also lead to Haftar overshadowing the HOR and Thini government. Strong Egyptian backing could likewise discourage Haftar from entering into negotiations with Islamists in Tripoli. Indeed, none of Haftar's representatives were present at the second round of UNSMIL talks held in Ghadames in early February⁶⁶; UNSMIL condemned the March 19 LAF airstrikes against Mitiga Air Base in east Tripoli as "a threat to dialogue"⁶⁷; and, more critically, the LNA launched a new ground offensive with air support to retake Tripoli on March 20,⁶⁸ which León said would put into "question the possibilities to continue working in the coming days."⁶⁹

Operation Dawn

Operation Dawn formed in July 2014 in response to Operation Dignity. Its first operation resulted in the destruction of Tripoli International Airport (TIP), leading to the eviction of pro-Operation Dignity forces from and the capture of Tripoli by the end of August. Operation Dawn subsequently boycotted the HOR and resurrected the GNC, a move that the same UN Security Council panel of experts said had no "precedent in post-revolution Libya with a similar scale and impact," adding that Dawn leadership was "ultimately responsible for the implosion of the political process."⁷⁰

Dawn elements claim a rival Libyan Army (LA),⁷¹ which includes some former army elements and the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces in western Libya,⁷² is led by Gen. Abdullah Obeidi,⁷³ and ostensibly reports to a Supreme Defense Council.⁷⁴ There is considerably less command and control among Dawn forces than among Dignity forces. The bulk of Operation Dawn consists of an unwieldy alliance of Islamist and revolutionary militias over which Hassi admitted on February 5 he has no control: “I did not give the order to start the war and I do not now have the ability to ask them to stop the war.”⁷⁵ In general, Islamist militias such as the Libyan Revolutionaries Operations Room (LROR), among others, are responsible for providing security in the capital, while hardline revolutionary militias have their base in the business-minded city of Misratah and nearby towns, and constitute the bulk of Dawn’s fighting power. Misratans are also leading Operation Sunrise, a front in the Gulf of Sirte that sought to wrest oil export terminals from the PFG, and the more recently formed Operation Quicksand against ISL in the Gulf of Sirte.⁷⁶

Hassi, in a mirror image of Haftar’s absolutism, has described Dawn’s struggle as a “war against tyranny,”⁷⁷ while Salah Badi, the Misratan commander who led the attack on the TIP,⁷⁸ characterized his military operation as a correction⁷⁹ to “protect the February 17 Revolution” from a “counter-revolutionary operation in Benghazi...the [Haftar-led] military coup.”⁸⁰ But while there are hardliners from Misratah opposed to negotiations, such as Badi⁸¹ and GNC representative Abdul Rahman al-Swehli,⁸² many of Misratah’s revolutionary brigades have signaled their support for dialogue and rejection of terrorism.⁸³ Islamists within Dawn have been most vocally opposed to peace talks. In addition to Misratah, according to León, Gharyan and Zawiyah support the talks⁸⁴ and attended preliminary discussions in Geneva on January 14, while Islamist factions were noticeably absent.⁸⁵ Operation Dawn’s fiery official Facebook page alleged that the talks had “failed miserably,” claiming that “the masks have fallen” from those looking after their own material interests at the expense of the revolution and warning that “the conspiracy led by León is not the first and will not be the last.”⁸⁶ The same page sarcastically

welcomed the second round of talks in Ghadames so that power may be returned to Muammar Qadhafi’s cousin in exile in Egypt, “Ahmed Qadhaf al-Dam and those around him,” with the result of “all revolutionary military and civilians being thrown in jail.”⁸⁷

Some former members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), a jihadist insurgency that once fought the Qadhafi regime, staunchly oppose negotiations. Former LIFG leaders Abdul Wahab al-Qayed⁸⁸ of the al-Wafa (Loyalty to the Martyrs) bloc and Sheikh Sami al-Saadi of the Umma al-Wasat Party⁸⁹ have reportedly have taken a firm stance against negotiations; former LIFG emir Abdul Hakim Belhaj of the Watan Party is, however, in favor of talks.⁹⁰ A few members of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Justice and Construction Party and Libya’s Grand Mufti, Sheikh Sadiq al-Gharyani,⁹¹ are on record opposing talks. The remaining thirty-some members of the al-Wafa Bloc⁹² in the rump GNC, who were also principal drivers of the political stalemate when Libya only had one parliament,⁹³ also oppose negotiations.⁹⁴ The general sentiment among those opposed to compromise is aptly summed up by an LROR-sponsored video of January 28, titled “Do Not Reconcile” and calling for “blood for blood, a head for a head”—in other words, an eye for an eye.⁹⁵

The most problematic aspect of the Dawn coalition is its relationship with extremists and penchant for conspiracy theories.⁹⁶ Again, the Islamist trend is the most culpable: Hassi has recklessly glorified Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL), a U.S.- and UN-designated terrorist organization, by calling it “beautiful”⁹⁷ and remarking that despite its extreme antipathy to democracy, its members could be “won over.”⁹⁸ Hassi’s replacement, Ghwell, has reportedly claimed that ASL members are “not extremists,” but “revolutionaries.”⁹⁹ The head of Dawn’s foreign media department, Jamal Zubia, described ASL as “closer to a mutual-aid society than a terrorist organization” and accused Algerian intelligence services of framing Islamists.¹⁰⁰ On February 16, the LROR even praised the Mujahedin Shura Council of Darnah and Its Suburbs (MSCDS),¹⁰¹ an amalgamation of jihadist groups within the al-Qaeda trend that formed in response to ISL’s rise in Darnah.

Dawn has also issued worrisome statements vis-à-vis ISL. Three Misratan soldiers with Operation Sunrise were reportedly abducted and killed by ISL fighters in early February while returning home from the front line, but Dawn's information office refused to name ISL as the culprit, and instead blamed "gangsters."¹⁰² Dawn's official Facebook page alleged that ISL consists primarily of remnants from the Qadhafi regime, claiming that "those who are raising the black flags supporting Daesh [ISIS] today were the ones that were raising the green flags yesterday, and they are following the orders of Qadhaf al-Dam and the money of Eastern and Western intelligence agencies." (The same post also praises ASL for securing Sirte, but ironically, much of ASL in Sirte later switched allegiances to ISL).¹⁰³ While remnants of the former regime (which was strongest in Sirte) have joined ISL, overstating their presence is simply propaganda.¹⁰⁴ Hassi has denied the very existence of the Islamic State in Libya – and even went as far as to blame Haftar for ISL attacks in Tripoli.¹⁰⁵

Misratah has also supported the ASL-dominated Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries (SCBR),¹⁰⁶ a coalition battling Operation Dignity that included at its inception Islamist militias of varying ideological rigidity,¹⁰⁷ but which moved to embrace ASL's hardline jihadist position.¹⁰⁸ The reason for this support is largely pragmatic: as long as Haftar is fighting the SCBR in the east, he will have a harder time threatening Misratah. This beneficial relationship for Operation Dawn has led some within the coalition, or influencers such as the Islamist al-Nabaa television station, to praise jihadist attacks against Operation Dignity forces as legitimately overseen by revolutionaries, while condemning jihadist attacks against their own forces as done by Qadhafi regime remnants.¹⁰⁹

This dishonest stance toward extremism is untenable, and Dawn's political cover for and material support to extremist groups risk blowback: as one Misratan Dawn commander noted, "Our next fight will be with Ansar al-Sharia and the Islamic State."¹¹⁰ While a fight pitting Dawn forces against ASL is not likely in the near future, a battle against ISL was inevitable. By promising to take the fight beyond Dignity forces

to include Operation Dawn, ISL has not displayed the same level of pragmatism as ASL, which has entered into tactical alliances. As friction increased with ISL's expansion westward toward Misratah, an agreement to avoid escalating conflict¹¹¹ and attempts to engage in dialogue broke down, leading to open fighting on March 14, when Misratah's 166th Battalion, originally part of Operation Sunrise, clashed with ISL forces forty miles east of Sirte.¹¹² Yet even as Misratan fighters engage ISL in combat and advance toward downtown Sirte,¹¹³ Operation Dawn's chief of staff and the GNC have continued to label ISL as Qadhafi loyalists¹¹⁴—propaganda that demonstrates Operation Dignity remains Dawn's primary concern.

■ The Islamic State and Libya's Changing VEO Landscape

The presence of VEOs in Libya is not a new phenomenon. The LIFG had pursued jihad within the confines of the Libyan state by refraining from pledging allegiance to Osama bin Laden and his more transnational project. Even though the LIFG dismantled itself before the war and had renounced violence as an organization,¹¹⁵ some of its members joined the 2011 armed uprising against Qadhafi, participating alongside Libyans who fought in Iraq against U.S. and coalition forces.¹¹⁶ It was clear from the beginning that an extremist presence existed among opposition fighters. The information minister for the National Transitional Council (NTC), Mahmoud Shaman, in response to a question about al-Qaeda working its way into the revolution, responded that "radicals...only represent 15% of the rebels" but opined that they "do not constitute a threat."¹¹⁷ A more pessimistic message came from former NATO secretary-general Anders Fogh Rasmussen when he warned that extremists would "try to exploit" the post-Qadhafi transition.¹¹⁸

Post-Qadhafi Transition

Some Libyan Islamist and jihadist groups, many of which did in fact possess revolutionary credentials (unlike ASL and ISL, which entered the scene post-revolution), opted to work with the state despite its democratic practices and aspirations, a move anathema to ISIS's ideological rigidity. The Abu Salim

Martyrs Brigade (ASMB) in Darnah, which espoused a brand of jihad closer to the LIFG and al-Qaeda than to the Islamic State, and the more Islamist February 17 Brigade in Benghazi from which the Rafallah al-Sahati Brigade and members of ASL would later emerge, cooperated with the transitional authorities. The ASMB, which prioritized local goals and refused to pledge allegiance to anyone outside Libya, much as the LIFG had done, had granted a covenant of protection to former NTC head Mustafa Abdul Jalil and had signed contracts with the Ministry of Interior.¹¹⁹ To defame the ASMB, ISL propagandists have characterized this act as “joining the state of apostates,”¹²⁰ putting the ASMB on the defensive and leading it to warn its critics against practicing *takfir* [excommunication] against the group.¹²¹ The Libya Shield brigades, created by the Ministry of Defense in summer 2012, quickly became populated by Islamist fighters on the government payroll,¹²² such as Libya Shield 1 in Benghazi. Even ASL had members who received government salaries,¹²³ and the group did not interfere with the country’s first democratic parliamentary elections on July 7, 2012. (Federalists, ironically, had attempted to disrupt the voting process with violence.¹²⁴) ASL now leads the SCBR, which includes the February 17 Brigade, the Rafallah al-Sahati Brigade, Libya Shield 1 and 2, and ASL’s Farouq Brigade, which was Misratan in origin and was based in Sirte before joining the SCBR.

One individual apparently affiliated with the Islamic Youth Shura Council (IYSC), the first VEO present in Libya to pledge allegiance to ISIS, on October 3, 2014, described how jihadist groups close to al-Qaeda cooperated with the transitional governments, at least from his perspective in Darnah. This individual, who goes by Shebl al-Adnani al-Libi on Twitter, indicated that jihadists had traveled to Libya and would have remained unorganized if not for the efforts of al-Qaeda: “Those with experience in Afghanistan and Algeria came to the Libyan scene, and their savior from fragmentation was al-Qaeda.”¹²⁵ Al-Qaeda could very well be shorthand for ASL. The IYSC member alleged the group had recruited in Darnah by calling on jihadists to “join al-Qaeda under the cover of ASL,”¹²⁶ while other ISL

propagandists have asserted that ASL is simply “al-Qaeda in Libya.”¹²⁷ (ASL is indeed close to al-Qaeda, and is even on the UN’s al-Qaeda sanctions list by association, but the group as a whole does not appear to have pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda.¹²⁸) But the *minhaj* (methodology) of “entering the tyrannical ministries and not practicing *takfir* against those in them”¹²⁹ was inappropriate, and “al-Qaeda did nothing and did not take a clear stance with respect to the [Libya] Shields, ASMB, and Rafallah al-Sahati Brigade; they did not *takfir* them and it is clear that their *minhaj* was distorted.”¹³⁰

The trend of Islamists and jihadists cooperating with the transitional authorities would come to an end with the steady collapse of the transitional process. The chaos that ensued left an opening for the most extreme jihadists to establish ISL, which like its peers in Syria and Iraq rejects any cooperation with “un-Islamic” democratic governments and elections as a whole. Such systems are deemed *shirk* (idolatry or polytheism), governance for *kuffar* (unbelievers) in opposition to the *tawhid* (unification) of the *umma* (Islamic community). Cooperation with the transitional authorities is likewise being used by ISL in a propaganda war against jihadists affiliated with the al-Qaeda trend.

Polarization and Competition

The IYSC’s pledge to Caliph Ibrahim, as ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is referred to affectionately by his supporters, and ISL’s subsequent and aggressive terrorism and propaganda, have polarized the VEO landscape in Libya. ISL has expanded beyond Darnah to Benghazi, Sirte, Nawfalia, and Tripoli, is rumored to have a presence in Ajdabiya, Khoms, Sabratha, and in the south, and has committed attacks against hydrocarbon infrastructure in the resource-rich Gulf of Sirte. ISL’s propaganda includes “hard” security and violent actions, as well as “soft” activities such as those focused on *hisba* (religious accountability) and *darwa* (proselytizing).¹³¹ The main goals of ISL propaganda are to deter and win recruits from competing jihadist groups, opposing tribes, and Operation Dawn and even Dignity forces, as well as draw foreign fighters and supporters to the “land of the caliphate” in Libya.

Haftar claims ISL has somewhere between 7,000 and 7,500 fighters,¹³² while the U.S. Department of State estimates the group's numbers around 1,000–3,000, with 800 in Darnah, some 300 of whom had previously fought in Syria and Iraq.¹³³ Foreign fighters feature prominently within ISL's ranks, including fighters from neighboring Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Sudan. While Operation Dignity forces have always had an interest in inflating ISL's numbers and the general threat posed by foreign fighters, it is telling that Misratah's 166th Battalion, allied with Operation Dawn, has also published¹³⁴ evidence of foreign fighters in ISL's ranks after engaging in clashes outside Sirte,¹³⁵ and its members have spoken openly about this phenomenon.¹³⁶

Part of ISL's successful expansion across Libya owes to its poaching of members from other jihadist groups, such as ASL.¹³⁷ ISL is taking root in areas that have had an ASL presence, with ASL's Sirte and Nawfalia branches appearing to have joined ISL wholesale, while in Darnah and Benghazi ASL members have joined individually;¹³⁸ reports of ASL's chief sharia jurist, Abu Abdullah al-Libi, joining ISL would be a huge blow to the group if confirmed.¹³⁹ Some formerly pro-ASL social media accounts have begun spreading ISL and ISIS propaganda.¹⁴⁰ The IYSC's pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State led to a split in the ASMB,¹⁴¹ with its head, former LIFG leader Salim Derby, later announcing the newly created MSCDS on December 12, 2014. Included in this new council are reported remnants of the LIFG, al-Nour Brigade, Libyan Islamic Army, and possibly ASL¹⁴² in Darnah.¹⁴³ Adnani reported with invective that the "MSCDS is now meeting with the ASMB, the LIFG, and those who have been stained with blasphemy, the call for elections, and the tyrannical ministries."¹⁴⁴

Relations have been better in Benghazi between ISL and al-Qaeda-affiliated VEOs, likely due to the need for a united front against Operation Dignity and supporting forces. As one jihadist commented, "In Benghazi you can find unity...[Islamic] State soldiers are in the same trenches as Ansar,"¹⁴⁵ while a pro-ASL account downplayed interjihadist tensions by claiming that "[Islamic] State soldiers and ASL

soldiers and all the mujahedin, there is no disagreement among them, just brotherhood and love."¹⁴⁶ Despite greater comity in Benghazi than in Darnah, ISL's successes have put ASL on the defensive. Some ASL supporters now deny claims the organization as a whole has ever cooperated with the transitional authorities, while others have argued that "the brothers [in Libya] saw that this type of fighting was for the needs of that time."¹⁴⁷ Around the beginning of February, ASL established an Islamic court and Islamic police units in areas of Benghazi they still control.¹⁴⁸ Some saw the move as an attempt to demonstrate they still control parts of the city,¹⁴⁹ but it was more likely meant to counter ISL's imposition of Islamic rule, which is undercutting ASL's standing.¹⁵⁰ By the end of March, ASL opened a general services office in areas under its control.¹⁵¹

Just as ISL has condemned Islamists and jihadists alike for working with the transitional state, ASL's sharia committee had called on leaders of the Islamist and formerly Ministry of Defense-affiliated Libya Shield to repent.¹⁵² In response, militias from the SCBR repudiated the state and asked for repentance.¹⁵³ Praise by pro-ISL propagandists¹⁵⁴ and ASL¹⁵⁵ for the head of Libya Shield 2, Boka Oreibi, who was killed fighting in Benghazi on March 23, underscores the shift of previously nonjihadist fighters toward the jihadist trend.

Tension in Libya between ISL and the broader al-Qaeda trend mirrors the competition in Syria between al-Qaeda's JN and ISIS. For example, Adnani has alleged "conspiracies from the Latakia mountains" on behalf of JN members who have entered Libya,¹⁵⁶ and al-Qaeda in general, against ISL.¹⁵⁷ One JN sympathizer, in response to the execution of twenty-one Christians—which was first announced three days before the execution video was released¹⁵⁸—quipped that "sometimes it seems that they took [al-Qaeda head] Sheikh [Ayman al-Zawahiri's 'advice for jihad' and are doing the opposite."¹⁵⁹ Indeed, the MSCDS was clear to disavow any connection with the February 22 suicide car bombings in the eastern town of al-Qubbah,¹⁶⁰ controlled by Dignity forces, which left more than forty people dead.¹⁶¹

The broader contours of this competition between the Islamic State and the al-Qaeda trend are forming around ISL on the one hand, and the mujahedin and revolutionary councils on the other. The MSCDS is allied with the Shura Council of Bayda Revolutionaries—whose January 2015 founding was announced on the February 17 Brigade’s official Facebook page¹⁶²—and the SCBR.¹⁶³ The last council to be formed is the Revolutionaries’ Shura Council of Ajdabiya and Its Suburbs (RSCAS), which is either led by or close to ASL.¹⁶⁴ (Interestingly, one account maintains that fighters from the Benghazi council want to change the “Revolutionaries” in their name to “Mujahedin”¹⁶⁵ to more clearly signal their true intent—pursuing jihad over the February 17 revolution; indeed, the MSCDS’s use of the “Mujahedin Shura Council” echoes the Mujahedin Shura Council that fought coalition forces in Iraq and to which al-Qaeda in Iraq belonged.) Competition for jihad in Libya can take two forms. First, just as ISIS and JN clashed in Syria, the competition in Libya between ISL- and al-Qaeda-aligned fighters similarly risks developing into greater interjihadist violence.¹⁶⁶ Second, with the death of ASL leader Muhammad al-Zahawi, announced January 24,¹⁶⁷ the remainder of ASL may join ISL. One pro-ISL account claimed, no doubt with some exaggeration if true, that Zahawi had said 70 percent of his group supported the Caliphate “but that they wanted to join collectively.”¹⁶⁸ With Zahawi gone, pressure will likely increase on the rest of ASL to come within the ISL fold.¹⁶⁹

ISL has expanded its focus beyond other jihadist groups and Operation Dignity forces to include a showdown with Libya Dawn. Pro-ISL propagandists are calling for a “Dawn of Islam,”¹⁷⁰ or “Dawn of Truth,”¹⁷¹ and “not Libya Dawn.” The pro-ISL writer Abu Moaz al-Barqawi, who has previously called on ASL members to join ISL,¹⁷² explained the reasoning behind this war on Dawn in a February 10 article titled “Libya Dawn: Fighting for Democracy.”¹⁷³ According to Barqawi, “Dawn is trusted with protecting the GNC and the apostates within it, and they have only fought for democracy; yes, they have fought the criminals in the Qaaqa and

Sawaiq Brigade in Tripoli [belonging to the Dignity camp], but they are no less criminal than them.”¹⁷⁴ Further proof of Dawn’s apostasy is its protection of “crusaders” in Tripoli’s Corinthia Hotel, such as an American and Frenchman who were killed in ISL’s siege of the hotel. In contrast, “The Islamic State fights for...God’s word to be the supreme word over the unbelievers...and your fighting, O Libya Dawn, has not been for this intention, and your dead are not martyrs.”¹⁷⁵

While Barqawi’s piece largely addresses the Islamist contingent of Dawn in Tripoli, others target Dawn’s revolutionary contingent: Misratah. The Battar Media Foundation, affiliated with the Libyan Battar Brigade, which fought in Syria,¹⁷⁶ attempted a softer approach in a publication titled “Issues You Should Know, People of Misratah.”¹⁷⁷ The document matter-of-factly explains ISL’s position against Qadhafi, Haftar, the Tobruk and Tripoli governments, and the Libyan armed forces and security apparatuses, and calls upon “those who support them to leave them.”¹⁷⁸ As part of a strategy to win over sympathetic elements in Misratah, the document attempts to engage with the city’s revolutionary credentials by claiming that “the Islamic State soldiers who are fighting Haftar and the Libyan governments...they themselves contributed to fighting Qadhafi and [bringing about] his fall.”¹⁷⁹ Others, such as the prolific pro-ISL propagandist Abu Irhim al-Libi, have similarly reached out to Misratah, extolling the city’s revolutionary virtues: “O land of heroes, your strength lies with the Islamic State.”¹⁸⁰ Although most of the effort is focused on winning over Islamists in Dawn, some pro-ISL writers have offered Dignity forces the opportunity to repent. Abu Osama al-Barqawi, in “a letter to the people of Barqa,” wrote, “We call upon the so-called Dignity soldiers and the awakening of apostasy to disown the tyrannical and pagan parliament...”¹⁸¹ However, even while making these overtures ISL was already engaged in low-level activities against forces tasked with securing Tripoli,¹⁸² thereby embarrassing the Hassi government, and taking on Misratan fighters¹⁸³ in the Gulf of Sirte.¹⁸⁴

ISL is committed to fighting Dignity and Dawn forces alike, and polarizing other VEOs like ASL as

part of a strategy to win over whomever they may, so as to fight the rest. The emergence of ISL is vindicating for Libya’s pro-Dignity quarter, which has long ascribed to all Islamists the specter of terrorism and warned of the worst in Libya, and a game changer for VEOs and Dawn forces alike. Toward the end of the Battar Media Foundation’s letter to the people of Misratah, readers are reminded that “the hands of the Islamic State reach to Tobruk and Bayda, as well as Tripoli and Misratah.”¹⁸⁵ There is no reason to believe ISL will not try to make good on its threats.

■ Theater Updates

Cyrenaica

The LNA in eastern Libya consists of al-Saiqa Special Forces units, infantry, a tank brigade, remnants of the navy and LAF, and tribal and irregular forces, known as the *sabwa* (awakening), named after the Sunni tribal *sabwa* against al-Qaeda in Anbar, Iraq, where ISIS has its roots. But the LNA has command-and-control issues and is not an entirely a regular force. In opposition to Operation Dignity in Benghazi are ISL and the SCBR, and in Darnah, ISL and the MSCDS. ISL and Operation Dignity are also opposed by the RSCAS in Ajdabiya and the SCBR in Bayda.

Operation Dignity forces have made incremental progress in Benghazi since nearly losing the city in late July 2014 to Islamist extremists.¹⁸⁶ On October 15, 2014, Haftar’s forces broke out of Benina International Airport, where they had been hemmed in by the SCBR, and moved on to seize several eastern neighborhoods. The LNA and *sabwa* forces have attempted to consolidate territorial gains and return Benghazi to a semblance of normalcy,¹⁸⁷ such as by relying on remnants of the National Security Directorate (police) to ensure security.¹⁸⁸ In a symbolic move, Thini’s government held its first meeting in Benghazi on February 1, 2015.¹⁸⁹ Haftar has claimed—and not for the first time¹⁹⁰—that the end of operations in Benghazi is near,¹⁹¹ pledging he would take control of the city by mid-April.¹⁹² Nevertheless, ASL’s extension of services to areas under its control indicates progress remains to be made.¹⁹³ Should Dignity forces liberate Benghazi, they purportedly would seek to then liberate Darnah from extremists.¹⁹⁴

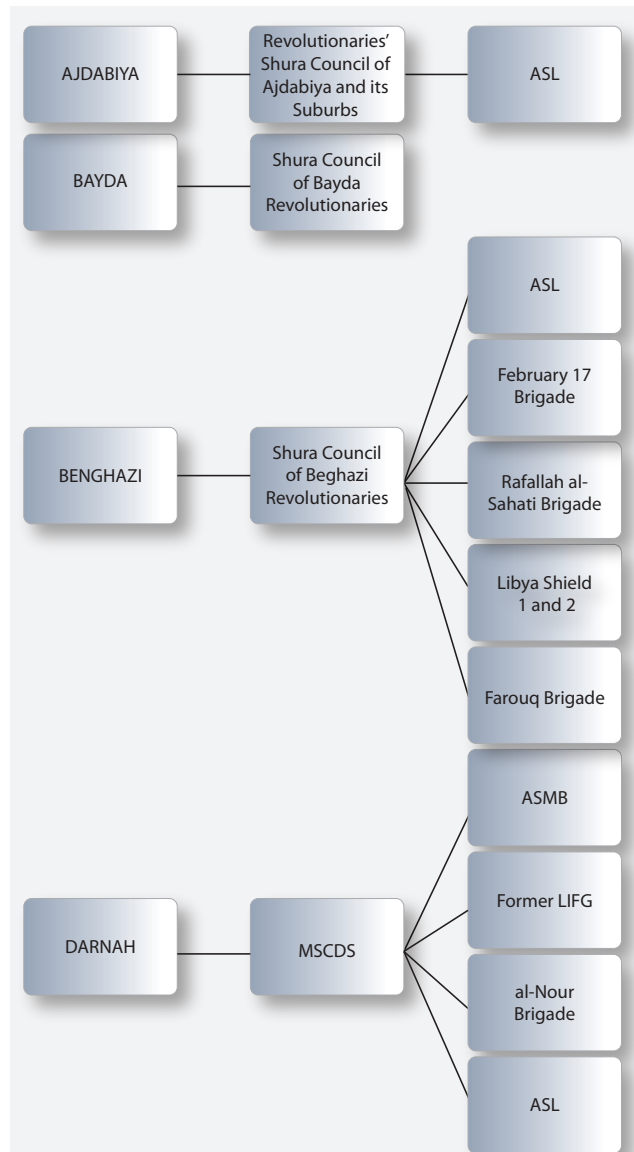


Fig. 1: Non-ISL “al-Qaeda Trend” Jihadists in Libya

The Central Front

Dawn militias opened a third front of fighting, Operation Sunrise, in the Gulf of Sirte on December 13, 2014, with a surprise attack¹⁹⁵ against the PFG in Bin Jawad,¹⁹⁶ thirty-seven kilometers west of Ras Lanuf. General Obeidi claimed that “it’s our duty to retake the fields from these bandits,”¹⁹⁷ while Sunrise’s official Facebook page claimed the LA sought to “liberate the oil terminals from terrorist gangs.”¹⁹⁸ As an attack against a Libyan state institution, the move

was in direct violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2174¹⁹⁹ and resulted in immediate environmental and economic repercussions for Libya, with the loss of some 1.48 million barrels of oil.²⁰⁰ Misratah's Libya Shield–Central Region led the operation, with Sunrise fighters launching rockets at the Ras Lanuf and Sidra oil export terminals,²⁰¹ destroying crude oil tanks and requiring 310 firefighters to extinguish the blaze.²⁰² The LAF provided air support to the PFG, and has bombed Dawn and Sunrise elements in Misratah, Sirte, and Bin Jawad.²⁰³ Fighting between the two sides abated due to ISL's advances in the Gulf of Sirte, with Misratah and the PFG toward the end of March reportedly agreeing to jointly fight ISL.²⁰⁴

Attacks against Libya's oil infrastructure are not limited to the Sunrise–PFG battle around coastal export terminals. ISL, likely from bases in Sirte and Nawfalia, has attacked the Mabruk,²⁰⁵ Bahi,²⁰⁶ and Dahra²⁰⁷ oil fields (further east, a bomb targeted the pipeline transporting oil from the El Sarir oil field to the Hariga export terminal, but responsibility is unclear²⁰⁸), resulting in PFG casualties. While news outlets and pro-ISL accounts²⁰⁹ claimed the attacks were the work of the Islamic State in Fezzan, no official acknowledgment has been issued to date.²¹⁰ The likely logic behind this drive against Libya's source of wealth is to deny the glue holding the respective Dawn and Dignity coalitions together: hydrocarbons. While ideological, tribal, and geographic motivations also drive both alliances, denying the ability to pay salaries and prospects of controlling Libya's purse strings would help fracture the alliances.

As a result of fighting in the Gulf of Sirte, Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC) warned toward the end of December that the country could not meet domestic consumption, let alone fulfill its international export obligations. An NOC statement, employing extremely dark rhetoric, warned: "The truth requires us to be very clear and candid with the Libyan people. The ongoing crisis in Libya points to the possibility of a slide into a dark tunnel of the unknown."²¹¹ Libya needed to export 800,000 barrels per day at \$100 per barrel to meet its 2014 budgetary needs,²¹² but oil production dropped to 490,000 bpd as of March 16²¹³—less than a third of its prewar

1.6 million bpd—with the cost of crude oil at \$42.85 per barrel.²¹⁴ Foreign reserves, estimated to be some \$100 billion around August 2014, could potentially be depleted within four years,²¹⁵ and on March 10 one Central Bank of Libya official remarked that Libya is less than two years away from a currency collapse.²¹⁶ The expansion of ISL in the Gulf of Sirte and attacks on Libya's hydrocarbons industry risk turning Libya's conflict from a civil war to, as one Libyan wrote, "a revolution of the hungry."²¹⁷

The Western Front

Dawn forces have had the most success in Tripolitania due to their August 2014 capture of Tripoli, effectively denying Dignity forces a swath of territory some six hundred kilometers long from the Libya-Tunisia Ras al-Jadir border crossing toward Sirte. The capital is home to Dawn's political establishment—the GNC and Hassi government—as well as a number of Islamist brigades of varying predispositions. Misratah is the seat of Libya's hardline-revolutionary trend, with a sizable business community; it fields more than forty brigades,²¹⁸ including the Libya Shield–Central Region. Amazigh communities also constitute part of this political-military alliance, extending from the Nafusa Mountains to Gharyan and coastal towns west of Tripoli, such as Zuwarah.

After the capital's capture, Dawn forces had temporarily improved security and services there,²¹⁹ with the LROR even claiming to have installed security cameras for policing.²²⁰ While Tripoli's overall humanitarian situation has improved,²²¹ the cost of quiet has been the repression of activists, the media, and political figures.²²² But the relative calm has not lasted: extremists soon resumed targeting manifestations of "un-Islamic" activity, such as by burning an art center in the Zawiyat al-Dahmani neighborhood²²³ and bulldozing a historic tomb there the very next day.²²⁴ These attacks picked up, with ISL claiming the December 27, 2014, car bombing of Diplomatic Police, and then the attacks on January 17 on the Algerian embassy and ten days later on the Corinthia Hotel, among others, in a clear pattern of escalation against symbolic foreign- and Dawn-affiliated targets.

While Dawn controls the coast, it is opposed by forces allied with Operation Dignity southwest of the capital. Zintan and tribal allies such as the Warshefana, with occasional backing from the LAF, have skirmished with pro-Dawn forces.²²⁵ Until the March 20 Zintani-led offensive, fighting largely took place along a line stretching from al-Assa to Riqdalin, Jmail, Sabratha, al-Ajailat, and southeast toward Kikla, and southwest to the heavily contested al-Watiyah Air Base. This renewed offensive has pushed the line north and northeast toward Gharyan, Azizia, and Zawiyah, with Zintani and Warshefana forces operating under the LNA capturing most of Azizia, forty-five kilometers southwest of the capital, on April 3.²²⁶

Tribal Warfare in the Southwest

By January 11, fighting in the southwestern desert town of Ubari between Tebu and Tuareg tribesmen, including Tebu from Chad and Tuareg from Mali,²²⁷ had lasted more than a hundred days, leaving upward of 150 people dead and 260 wounded.²²⁸ After several failed ceasefires, fighting erupted again on March 20, led by a Tebu counteroffensive.²²⁹ Some 85 percent of the town's population has been reportedly displaced.²³⁰ The conflict between Tuareg (some pro-Dawn but generally not unified) and Tebu (overwhelmingly pro-Dignity) minorities in Ubari is expressed along Dignity-Dawn lines,²³¹ with the Tebu steadfastly siding with Dignity and Haftar's expansive war against Islamists, while the Tuareg are fragmented,²³² with some openly supported by and backing Misratah and its Amazigh allies in the northwest. Tebu forces, from Murzuq to Ubari, claim to be part of the LNA, whereas the Tuareg 316th Brigade in Ubari has claimed to be with the LA. The Tuareg al-Haq Brigade is widely rumored to have al-Qaeda or Islamic State connections—certainly a convenient narrative for Tebu forces to propagate—and while the brigade is widely thought to be involved in extremism, it has made no formal and public pledges of allegiance or other outward signs of affiliation. There are reports of significant numbers of Malian Tuareg and Chadian Tebu also participating in the fighting,²³³ with this foreign presence circumventing Libyan chains of command and thereby complicating deescalation efforts.

Rather than ideology, this deadly tribal fighting has more to do with control of territory and local economies, matched with tribal grievances. The fighting, which has lasted over half a year, has roots in Tebu gains in post-Qadhafi Libya, namely their expansion westward from their Murzuq stronghold. A deeper reading of the conflict shows that the south is also an arena for tribal competition over the rights to sell contraband, smuggling routes, oil fields, and gold prospecting.²³⁴ This current round of fighting that began in September likely was sparked when a Tuareg militia attempted to seize a gas station protected by Tebu fighters.²³⁵ As for tribal grievance narratives, one Tuareg leader, in a propaganda video posted before a firefight, presented “a modest message to all Libyans: we say to you that we have raised our weapons because we are oppressed...Do not waste your ammunition and efforts. Nobody knows when this war will end, nor does it matter to us if it is long or short. The important thing is that we are defending our lands and ancestors, who have lived here for thousands of years.”²³⁶ For both sides, the ultimate aim of this battle in Ubari is expulsion.²³⁷ Nonetheless, the Islamist versus non-Islamist narrative has played an important organizational role in politicizing local conflicts and interests among both the Tuareg and Tebu.²³⁸

Fighting in the southwest spread to Brak al-Shati, north of Sebha, on March 4 or 5, centering on the town's air base. Local interests are likely also at play, but the conflict nonetheless carries with it Dignity-Dawn overtones. This is particularly salient since Misratah's Third Force, supported by the Awlad Suleiman tribe, is stationed at the Temenhent Air Base, outside Sebha.²³⁹ Fighting has since spread beyond Brak al-Shati to checkpoints north of Sebha,²⁴⁰ where Tebu and the Magarha tribe could fight the Third Force, presenting the possibility of a broader tribal war in Libya's southwest. Worse, ISL propaganda tailored to Libya's southern tribes—such as one video in which two Tuareg are calling on Malian Tuareg to pledge allegiance to Baghdadi,²⁴¹ and another by a Tebu calling for Tebu to join ISL²⁴²—indicates the group has aspirations for Libya's south and beyond into the broader Sahara/Sahel region.

■ The Way Forward

Flaws in the Top-Down Approach

Chaos in Libya threatens North Africa and the Middle East.²⁴³ ISL is only 217 miles from Italy's coast, and the group's own "Jihadi John" promised that "we will conquer Rome."²⁴⁴ But the NATO coalition that first intervened in Libya in 2011, and then promptly assumed a hands-off posture, has lately been more preoccupied with wars in Syria, Iraq, and Ukraine. Even in light of ISL's grisly appearance on the Libyan VEO scene, and as the subsequent calls for intervention grow more urgent,²⁴⁵ the focus remains on UNSMIL-led negotiations. The governments of France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Britain, and the United States warned on the fourth anniversary of Libya's February 17 revolution that "the United Nations-led process to establish a national unity government provides the best hope for Libyans to address the terrorist threat and to confront the violence and instability that impedes Libya's political transition and development."²⁴⁶ The respective British and U.S. ambassadors to Libya, Michael Aron and Deborah K. Jones, writing on the same anniversary, reaffirmed the need for "the UN political dialogue process"²⁴⁷ and argued that "a national unity government...[c]onfronting Libya's enemies—foreign and domestic—will remain impossible without such a government."²⁴⁸ The parameters of such an agreement, as indicated in the first round of negotiations in January in Geneva, emphasized an agreement on democratic principles, the support of state institutions, and the rejection of terrorism.²⁴⁹ The hope is that a lasting ceasefire would lead to withdrawals, weapons control and monitoring, and finalizing of the constitutional process.²⁵⁰

A top-down political bargain to bring about a ceasefire between key players should be pursued, if only for the remote chance it will succeed, or at the very least, to bring about some measure of deconfliction or to simply exhaust the option. But the goal of buttressing democratic principles and state institutions ignores the reality that both the GNC and HOR invoke democratic principles as their *raison d'être*, although of the two, the HOR has far greater claims to legitimacy due to its elected and interna-

tionally recognized status. Moreover, state institutions have never truly existed in Libya since Qadhafi first took power; one U.S. administration official described the ministries under the transitional governments as "Potemkin."²⁵¹ And then there is the scourge of terrorism by ISL, ASL, and other jihadist groups, the threat of which during the transitional period was not as elevated as it is now. Dawn's problematic relationship with jihadists such as ASL, and general denial of the nature of the ISL threat, calls into question the extent to which elements in Dawn, particularly the Islamist trend, can fully reject terrorism.

UNSMIL's loose framework for implementing a unity government is fraught with impracticalities. The proposed "presidential council of independent personalities" that would nominally lead the country would do so only in name, for such a council's very independence would mean it is not connected to the powerful fighting forces on the ground. And while the framework endorses the HOR as Libya's legitimate parliament, it remains to be seen which elements within the GNC would accept dissolving their legislative body. On the Tobruk side, acts of "sabotage," as one diplomat put it, of the ongoing negotiations from the pro-Haftar camp underscore his unwillingness to compromise with his rivals.²⁵² The provision of security to protect a unity government and state institutions when all fighting forces are heavily politicized is another matter entirely. Post-Qadhafi, each transitional government was both unified and a failure at a time of even greater political will and better security than what exists today. As one prominent Libyan analyst remarked, "There is not a conflict because there are two governments; there are two governments because of a conflict."²⁵³ Similarly, Thini commented on April 1 that the conflict "is a crisis of security...and not a political crisis as is promoted by León."²⁵⁴ In other words, the fighting is a result of deeper fissures that a unity government cannot fully address. A return to such a government would result in a powerless and divided political body, just as with the preceding transitional governments, with all the hallmarks of a failed state: an inability to monopolize the use of force within state borders, an inability to control people and borders, and an inability to provide

public goods.²⁵⁵ The notion of a unity government as a necessary precondition to lift the UN arms embargo, in place since 2011, is fraught with risk.²⁵⁶ Delivering more weapons to armed factions in a country suffering from weapons proliferation could further undermine attempts at establishing the very unity government sought by UNSMIL, further destabilizing the region. A weak unity government with shaky capacity would likely prove unable to work with any new security agreement initiatives—just as past transitional governments have failed to leverage external support for the country’s weak security services.²⁵⁷

Lastly, the idea that more “institution building” could bring about stability,²⁵⁸ or that the elected Constitution Drafting Assembly (CDA) could “play a role in returning peace to Libya,”²⁵⁹ is similarly unrealistic. (The CDA released a draft document for public review on Libya’s Independence Day, December 24, 2014.²⁶⁰) CDA head Ali Tarhouni mused that “even if we come up with a constitution, what can you do with a constitution in a situation like this?”²⁶¹ And as León noted, a public referendum on the constitution cannot be held amidst total chaos,²⁶² and certainly not amidst massive displacement and rising extremism. A top-down political grand bargain may succeed in papering over Libya’s massive fault lines and security challenges, but it will not likely achieve the stability sought by UNSMIL and supporting countries.

The Case for a Bottom-Up Approach

The emphasis on a top-down settlement ignores the extent of polarization on the ground. One Libyan blogger acknowledged this discrepancy when he wrote that “while senior political analysts talk about the court decisions, and about the legitimacy of this or that, people have a simple and sharp way of explaining events without any analysis; just simple words: either with or against.”²⁶³ Such an approach also ignores the reality of power dynamics in Libya. CDA member Abdel Kader Kadoura wrote that “local power is the base of constructing a state in Libya. We cannot compare Libya with any other country...because our country is constituted around tribal or regional characteristics, and this is something that we cannot neglect, whether from a political Islam or secular perspective.”²⁶⁴

UNSMIL’s negotiation efforts now include municipal councils,²⁶⁵ political parties, and tribes,²⁶⁶ reflecting an important recognition that power in Libya is established from the ground up.²⁶⁷ The tribal track is particularly central since Libya’s tribes are inherently social and political. Predating the state, they are, in essence, readily available structures with which to negotiate.²⁶⁸ (Political parties, in contrast, have very little history in Libya and their true representation is overstated.) Ground-up mediation efforts can engage those who actually hold power in each of Libya’s three provinces, whether they are municipal councils, *shura* (consultation) councils, or armed formations. Local efforts at negotiation, which can be done based on traditional mediation practices, are also best suited to address the very intimate nature of the violence ripping apart Libya’s social fabric. This process would ultimately be like putting together a puzzle, whereby the many pieces of the state are slowly reassembled; the more pieces there are in place, the greater the potential for progress. Without a doubt, some pieces will remain missing.

Tripolitania has a greater chance of ground-up progress than Cyrenaica, where extremist groups like ISL and ASL are more deeply entrenched. Moreover, Zintan and Misratah have considerable command and control over their forces, making them comparably well equipped to adhere to a deal, along with having economic interests to preserve. Misratans, inhabiting their coastal city, are concerned about imports and exports that depend on the country’s overall economic health, while Zintanis—occupying a powerful mountain city near the Tunisian and Algerian borders—are concerned about their cross-border activities and interests in southwestern Libya, where their militias expanded greatly during the 2011 revolution. Already in 2015, the two sides have twice exchanged prisoners.²⁶⁹ The Warfallah tribe, which is Libya’s largest and has succeeded in remaining somewhat neutral, might also sit at a negotiating table with Misratah if others, such as the Zintanis, were present. Engaging the Zintanis and Warfallah would increase the chances of expanding a consensus among other formerly pro-Qadhafi tribes, such as the Warshefana, Abu Seif, Magarha, and Qadhahfa. Any rapprochement

between Zintan and Misratah should include the requirement that the latter publicly denounce ASL and the SCBR. Hardline Islamists in Dawn, primarily in Tripoli, will simply have to be sidelined and marginalized for their rejectionism, and dealt with later.

A rapprochement is also possible between Zintan and the Amazigh, who are not natural allies with Dawn's Islamist elements. Just as the Amazigh are wary of Zintani hegemony over the Nafusa Mountains, they are also suspicious of the pro-Dawn town of Gharyan and the Mashasha tribe projecting influence into their territories. Guaranteeing protection for Amazigh cultural and linguistic rights could split them from the Dawn alliance and bring about a ceasefire in the Nafusa Mountains. Some Libyan observers with intimate knowledge of northwestern tribal dynamics believe the Amazigh towns of Jadu or Yafran could facilitate such a process.²⁷⁰ Recent Zintani and Warshefana advances southwest of Tripoli could put pressure on the Amazigh and on Misratah to negotiate local truces, particularly the latter in order to secure its western flank.

A rapprochement between Zintan and the Amazigh could serve as a springboard to include tribes in the southwest. The Zintanis are close to, and have influence over, the pro-Dignity Tebu, while the Amazigh in the north come from the same tribal family as the Tuareg in the south. Once the Tuareg and Tebu cease hostilities, they could conceivably redirect their efforts toward patrolling Libya's vast southern border—to not only reap the benefits their communities have traditionally enjoyed from cross-border smuggling but, more important, to counter the free movement of jihadists.

How to Fight ISL and Other VEOs

The solutions to combat ISL, ASL, and other jihadist VEOs can be found within Libya. Bottom-up negotiations that involve key stakeholders hold the best chances of success in Tripolitania and Fezzan, as ceasefires or more-lasting truces among warring parties in both regions would also represent the first steps toward reorienting wartime efforts against the spread of VEOs. Cyrenaica remains the most challenging theater due to its entrenched VEOs.

Former NATO secretary-general Rasmussen claimed on February 16 that “we will need boots on the ground” to fight ISL,²⁷¹ while Egypt²⁷² and Thini²⁷³ have called for foreign intervention. ISL and its supporters not only anticipate an intervention²⁷⁴ but may actually be trying to provoke one, as part of a strategy of recruitment and even possibly alleviating broader pressure on ISIS by splitting U.S. and Western European countries' resources.²⁷⁵ ISL has proven that it can escalate violence in Libya in response to international intervention, as demonstrated by the al-Qubba suicide car bombings in answer to Egypt's airstrikes.²⁷⁶ Intervention in North Africa led by former colonial powers Italy and France, as well as Egypt due to Sisi's war on the Muslim Brotherhood, would feed into ISL narratives used for recruitment and to enhance domestic legitimacy.

In Cyrenaica, despite Haftar's polarizing revanchism, his forces were the first to take on VEOs and have shouldered the brunt of the counterterrorism effort. As encouraging as Misratah's recent engagements against ISL are, they do not compare to the sacrifices made by Operation Dignity forces, both throughout the civil war and as targets of an assassination campaign preceding it. But still, Misratah, with its heavy firepower, growing daylight with Islamists in Tripoli, and demonstrated willingness to fight ISL in the Gulf of Sirte, can play a significant role in combating ISL. Therefore, relevant outside powers must continue to lean on Haftar, as commander of the armed forces, to deescalate aggressive rhetoric against Misratah; Haftar and the HOR's labeling of Dawn forces, including Misratah, as terrorists is particularly problematic. An April 5 statement by the HOR condemning an ISL attack against Misratan forces is one such encouraging step.²⁷⁷ Similarly, outside powers must maintain pressure on Misratah to split from unreasonable elements in Dawn that are wholly rejectionist and have whitewashed the extremist threat in Libya. A formal truce between the two sides is not needed to jointly combat ISL, although it would help. Between the anvil of Misratah from Tripolitania and the hammer of Dignity from Cyrenaica, ISL's advances can be rolled back and contained.

The Role of Foreign Powers

The United States, its European allies, and UNSMIL should complement existing UNSMIL efforts by engaging with Libya's neighbors to develop a ground-up strategy. This could include, for example, working with Tunisia and Algeria to address the tribes straddling the two countries' respective borders with Libya, or cooperating with France to use its Saharan and Sahelian networks to reduce the likelihood of a broader southwestern tribal war. (Algeria is currently attempting to broker a Tuareg-Tebu truce.²⁷⁸)

Beyond supporting UNSMIL negotiation efforts that include municipal councils and tribes, or developing their own coordinated tracks, foreign powers should aim first and foremost to contain Libya's crisis from spilling over across North Africa and the Mediterranean. This requires refining existing arms embargos and acting to prevent the smuggling of oil and to protect hydrocarbon infrastructure. UN Security Council Resolution 2174, which calls for an arms embargo and relies on enforcement by neighboring states, has not proven effective; one diplomat called it "a joke."²⁷⁹ The Security Council panel of experts discussed before noted that the resolution has been used as a deterrent and an incentive for negotiations—a failure on both counts. Implementation of the arms embargo is weak because enforcement is piecemeal and demand for arms and ammunition high.²⁸⁰ EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini has suggested EU ships could play a role,²⁸¹ and Russia's permanent representative to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, indicated Russia could become involved, a move welcomed by Egypt.²⁸²

Without coordinating efforts and addressing Libya's vast and porous southern borders, which France is currently attempting to police,²⁸³ the arms embargo will continue to fail. One way to improve UNSC Resolution 2147 would be to coordinate a multinational effort to support an aerial and naval observation and interdiction regime. This international framework would leverage U.S., European, and perhaps even Russian capabilities in the Mediterranean, Sahara, and Sahel to improve intelligence gathering for monitoring, to the extent possible, violations of the arms

embargo and the movement of VEOs both within Libya and across Libya's porous borders. Actionable intelligence could be passed on to friendly local actors. This regime would also help address the flow of refugees and migrants out of Libya toward Europe, a high-casualty journey and one jihadists may exploit to reach southern Europe. Continual monitoring of Libyan borders and airspace could incorporate other countries that might have wished to unilaterally intervene, thereby providing a sanctioned means of helping stabilize Libya, while simultaneously deterring the impulse toward unilateral action. This observation and interdiction regime could be scalable, to include more aggressive aerial interdictions targeting VEOs. Such an interdiction regime could already have prevented the movement of large armed ISL convoys toward towns like Nawfalia and Sirte, or against oil fields in the Sirte Basin.

Second, establishing an escrow account for Libya's assets and hydrocarbon wealth could provide the international community with greater leverage within Libya. Such an account, managed by a respected third party such as Malta, where the Central Bank of Libya has run operations throughout the civil war, could help depoliticize and protect Libya's hydrocarbon sector from damaging initiatives like Operation Sunrise.²⁸⁴ The United States has already signaled that it will not tolerate unilateral federalist moves to sell Libya's oil,²⁸⁵ and further assurances could help reach a more lasting entente in the Gulf of Sirte. If Misratans and federalists are not fighting each other, both will have greater resources to target ISL's steady advance in their backyard as well as protect vulnerable infrastructure. Oil revenues could also be used to reward local actors that agree to ceasefires or more comprehensive agreements, especially if their resources are instead directed against VEOs.

■ Conclusion

The military-political alliances of Operations Dignity and Dawn are limited by hardliners opposed to a unity government within their respective ranks and, particularly in the case of Dawn, their own limitations as alliances. A top-down agreement that returns Libya to the post-Qadhafi transitional process may prove unable to

deliver security, at the least, and worse, it could exacerbate the conflict. This is especially true if a unity government is used as a precondition for lifting the Security Council weapons embargo. A return to a bitter and divided government is not the solution for righting the country, nor combating ISL. Rather, the United States and its European allies should throw their weight behind UNSMIL efforts to engage Libya's municipal councils and tribes, or even develop their own parallel tracks. Achieving local truces and more permanent agreements, however patchwork they may be, is the first step toward providing stability and reorienting

Libya's many armed factions toward fighting VEOs such as ISL and ASL. Establishing an escrow account for Libya's assets and vital hydrocarbon wealth can both depoliticize the country's hydrocarbon infrastructure and be used to reward good behavior. Further, an international aerial- and sea-based regime could contain spillover and prevent extremists from being smuggled into Europe. It would also constrain regional actors pursuing unilateral objectives in Libya, and could easily be upgraded from an intelligence-gathering regime in support of interdictions to an armed regime, should the need arise.

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