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Azeem Ibrahim  
azeem@ibrahim.com

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## Strategic Insights: ISIS in Libya: A Threat or a Dead-End?

September 26, 2018 | Dr. Azeem Ibrahim

### INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Prior to 1912, Libya was a province within the Ottoman Empire and subdivided into two regions (Tripolitania in the west and Cyrenaica in the east) reflecting a long-standing ethnic and geographic division in the country. Although not administered separately, the large region reaching south into the Sahara had a different ethnic make-up compared to the rest of the country and was more connected to sub-Saharan Africa than to the Mediterranean. Ottoman control in the south was limited to a few towns, which gave them some oversight of the trade routes; but by the start of the 20th century, Ottoman authority was notional rather than effective in this region.

After the Italian conquest, the inland regions remained de facto independent until the 1930s when the Italians finally took control of the entire country. The period of Italian rule was a disaster economically, marked by frequent revolts, and saw a net reduction in the population.

In 1951 Libya became an independent kingdom, and in 1969 Muammar Gaddafi took power after a military coup. The underlying orientation of his regime was toward his own version of socialism and was often more focused on intervention across Africa than toward the pan-Arabist regimes such as Nasser's Egypt. As such, some of the domestic opposition to his regime, especially from the 1980s onwards, came from Islamist-orientated organizations.

In 2011, as part of the wider Arab Spring uprising, a major revolt broke out and the western region, especially Benghazi, overthrew the local governors. Following an Anglo-French intervention, the revolt spread across the country leading to the collapse of the regime by August 2011.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, failure to plan for the post-conflict phase resulted in the country being fractured on geographical and tribal lines despite a number of attempts to mediate a solution.<sup>2</sup>

Around 97 percent of the Libyan population is Arab or Berber, the only exception being a substantial Tuareg minority in the south. The population grew from 1 million in 1954 to 5.6 million in 2006, partly due to the Gaddafi regime granting Libyan citizenship to Tunisian, Egyptian, and Palestinian workers. This implies that some 50 percent of the population are recent arrivals and calls into question the common narrative that Libya can only be described as a tribal society, even if powerful Berber tribal groupings dominate the country.

The country is almost 100-percent Sunni, and most native Libyans have traditionally followed an austere form of Islam. However, neither the monarchy nor the Gaddafi regime particularly identified themselves as Islamic, and one of the main opposition groups to his regime was the Salafist Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG).

After the fall of Gaddafi, Libya effectively splintered along the lines of its historical subdivisions and also according to which militia or tribal group was dominant in a given town or region. By 2015, a Government of National Accord (GNA) was agreed to between all the main factions, drawing in the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HOR), the Tripoli-based General National Congress (GNC), and the Libya Dawn militia groups. While all the groups are notionally

committed to this process, progress has stalled over disputes about which jobs and functions should be allocated to which group. Thus, the HOR are unwilling to give up its control over the Libyan military while groups aligned to the GNC have generally become more supportive of the GNA. Equally, the HOR have de facto control of the regions with most of Libya's oil industry.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) control of Sirte (discussed below) became a source of tension. Partly, the dispute has been about how to attack ISIS, but also it is about who benefits from their defeat. Sirte (see figure 1) is located between the regions dominated by the GNC and HOR and is claimed by both.



Source: Graphic created by Congressional Research Service. Map borders and cities created using data from Department of State, 2013; Esri, 2013; and Google Maps.

**Figure 1. Map of Libya<sup>3</sup>**

Thus, while there is support for a unitary government based around the GNA, in reality, the two main regional factions are in dispute about control of the army and of Libya's oil reserves. In addition, while both factions have been attacked and are threatened by ISIS for taking part in the GNA framework, both stand to make gains if ISIS is defeated by their own forces.<sup>4</sup> Thus, even the defeat of ISIS may—as in Syria and Iraq—trigger more conflict as the various victorious factions fight over the spoils. As is often the case, this situation is complicated by the two factions having their own foreign sponsors, in this case, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates have tended to back the HOR.<sup>5</sup>

## AL-QAEDA IN LIBYA

After the 2011 civil war, Libya was left without a functioning government and splintered into small units ruled over by various tribal and militia groups.<sup>6</sup> As noted earlier, the two historic subdivisions of the country effectively produced their own national government.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, al-Qaeda (AQ) then sought to exploit the situation.

AQ had originally sought to cooperate with the LIFG, and it is clear that some individuals worked with AQ in creating a local branch of AQ's wider network then being established across North Africa. However, the bulk of the LIFG opposed links with AQ as their focus was on the governance of Libya, not global jihad.<sup>8</sup> While in prison, its leadership went further and came to realize "that the use of violence as a means of overthrowing governments in Muslim countries was illegal from an Islamic point of view."<sup>9</sup> This represented not just a tactical rejection of AQ (i.e., a local rather than international focus) but also a split on a fundamental matter of ideology.

Consequently, prior to 2011, AQ only had a small network operating under the Ansar al-Sharia label. During and after the uprising, this network operated in a manner similar to Al-Nusra in Syria. It sought to cooperate with other Salafist groups who shared key elements of its ideology rather than insist on total acceptance of AQ's fundamental beliefs. By 2012, it was estimated that AQ had some 300 members in Libya spread between Darnah, Sirte, and Kuffra but with more influence among the other militias than these raw numbers might imply.

## ISIS IN LIBYA

Again, mirroring the dynamics in Syria, ISIS started to establish themselves in Libya in early 2013. As in Syria, they have largely rejected the option of cooperating with other Salafist groups and have instead tried to impose their own agenda and organization.

The Quilliam Foundation has translated an ISIS document that sets out their initial strategy in Libya.<sup>10</sup> In particular, in order to create a substantial cadre of militants, ISIS tried to build up their presence partly by stopping the flow of Libyan fighters to Syria and partly by fusing with some local militia groups who were sympathetic to their goals. Key goals included:

- Treating Libya as a new province of the Caliphate;
- Extending ISIS into Libya to lessen pressure on Syria and Iraq so they could reach both into Saharan Africa and across the Mediterranean; and,
- Using Libya—an easy place to gain access to military supplies—to fuel other conflicts (such as in Mali).

However, while the ISIS document identified Libya as an important option, it also suggested that the group faced a limited time frame in which it could consolidate its control. ISIS first based itself in Derna in January 2013.<sup>11</sup> The murder of Western tourists in Tripoli and the beheading of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians briefly led to discussions of joint action between Egypt and Italy. However, other European Union (EU) nations and the United States insisted on diplomatic actions and even maintained the existing arms embargo on the Libyan Government leading to the rapid collapse of the Italian-Egyptian initiative. The EU and the United States at this stage were unwilling to intervene despite ISIS's provocations, as they feared that ISIS would be able to exploit the presence of Western troops to generate additional support for their cause.<sup>12</sup>

Although ISIS has established a presence in a number of coastal towns—in effect, the same towns that AQ had earlier infiltrated—its main base was in Sirte. There, it effectively took over the existing AQ network (again as in Syria, some AQ militants swapped allegiance). However, the group's brutality and sectarian approach provoked a local backlash and it briefly lost power in late 2015 before regaining control of the city in early 2016. At this stage, it is estimated that ISIS had some 1,500 fighters in the city (a substantial increase over the AQ numbers in 2011). The United Kingdom-based newspaper *The Guardian* has suggested it had 1,000 fighters in the city in August 2016 at the start of U.S. air attacks, which may indicate casualties in combat, or the movement of militants to other regions.<sup>13</sup> Since then, ISIS has suffered further setbacks limiting their control to portions of a few towns. However, Libya remains fragmented despite further peace talks leaving the group to take advantage of any future opportunities.

## OPTIONS FOR ISIS

As in Syria, it appears as if ISIS overreached in Libya. It did not seek to create a network of allies, triggering conflict with rival militias—even where they share a common Salafist background. Equally, its relative power in Sirte provoked a sustained U.S. response in an attempt to suppress the group.

ISIS's original goals in Libya seem to have been to create both a second front to distract its opponents in Syria and a new area of physically controlled territory. This area would either provide a place to retreat if it lost Syria or a very valuable secondary territory if it could hold onto both.<sup>14</sup> It is clear that for ISIS, even more than for AQ, the occupation of territory is a very important part of its appeal and relative dominance amongst the global network of jihadist groups. On this basis, loss of its bases in Syria, Iraq, and Libya will represent a major loss of face.

However, even as the group has lost most of its physical control, Libya offers a number of potential strategies, such as:

- It has created a network in the country, partly following the original AQ presence that allows it to move its base to another district within the country;
- As in Iraq, it would appear that ISIS has made an alliance with the essentially secular remnants of the Gaddafi security network.<sup>15</sup> In turn, this may give the group the means to infiltrate the weak state structures being set up and make it very hard to eliminate;
- While the Libyan oil terminals are either not working or mostly well-guarded, again as in Syria, the ability to control local production can provide substantial revenues to the group;
- The refugee crisis is another ready source of funding. By extorting money from those fleeing war, ISIS has shown that poverty and persecution is an easy way to fund their operations. In addition, it opens another route by which it can send militants to Europe, especially now that the option to move between Syria and Turkey is limited;
- Either unintentionally – as its fighters flee defeat around Sirte – or as a deliberate policy to disperse its militants across North Africa, it is possible that ISIS may simply send its cadres now in Libya to other states.<sup>16</sup> Since it clearly built up its strength in Libya by preventing North African militants from traveling to Syria,

it is reasonable to assume that many of these militants are from neighboring countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria. In turn, as nationals of those countries, they are less likely to be detected upon return – especially as there is a substantial Tunisian expatriate community in Libya from the Gaddafi years; and,

- Finally, Libya is awash with arms. Quite simply, ISIS can use Libya to arm itself or to sustain conflicts across North Africa and into sub-Saharan Africa. There are plenty of regional conflicts it could seek to exploit creating the potential to cause chaos across a vast region.

The latter strategy could be facilitated partly as the Tuareg feel oppressed in many states, especially in Mali, Niger, and Chad.<sup>17</sup> Equally, the Gaddafi regime had a past record of intervention in these conflicts, in particular, the civil war in Chad.

In effect, even if ISIS loses its territory in Syria and Iraq and fails to establish territorial control in Libya, it is clear that Libya offers it many valuable options. However, without its own state, in effect, it faces the same dilemma that affected AQ after the loss of its bases in Afghanistan. It remains deadly, it remains influential, but for the most part, it has to operate through other groups—which tend to have their own immediate concerns regardless of any notional attachment to global jihad.

## **GENERAL OPTIONS FOR THE WEST**

The damage caused by the Anglo-French indifference after the fall of Gaddafi has been done, and that damage has practically left Libya with no government.<sup>18</sup> By late 2016, the United States had lost patience with its European allies and used its air power and special forces to attack ISIS directly in its stronghold of Sirte. This additional pressure, plus ISIS's failure to work with local groups, led to the group being forced to abandon the city.

This is a welcome development and will further reduce ISIS's appeal, especially if it is linked to the destruction of its control in Syria and Iraq. However, as noted earlier, Libya offers ISIS far more than just a new region for its caliphate.

If we are serious about challenging ISIS in Libya, this means:

- We have to assist Libya in rebuilding its state structures – and to be aware of the real danger that ISIS will be able to infiltrate any emerging government. This probably means that we need to work with other Libyan groups opposed to Gaddafi and ISIS – regardless of whether or not we like their Salafist doctrine. However, before accepting that these tribal networks are the dominant force in the new Libya, as noted earlier, we should realize that approximately 50 percent of the population are of Tunisian or Egyptian descent. In effect, Libya is not as tribal as is sometimes assumed indicating there is more to rebuilding the country than may appear;
- The refugee crisis is a potential source of revenue for ISIS as much as a means to send its militants back into Europe. As long as the crossing of the Mediterranean is under the control of unscrupulous criminal gangs, this will continue. There is no point in Europe pretending that the pressure to cross the Mediterranean will be contained by either attacking the smuggling networks or establishing refugee

camps in Libya. Those who have already fled from countries such as Eritrea, Ethiopia, the Sudan, and Nigeria will find the means to carry on their journey – especially when staying in Libya means living in a country with no rule of law and which is at the mercy of criminal gangs. This means the EU has to accept the reality of the situation and provide a safe route into Europe. It can then deal with the final resettlement under secure and safe conditions; and,

- Finally, as noted earlier, ISIS and AQ are adept at manipulating genuine grievances for their own ends. Attention should be paid to the range of conflicts across sub-Saharan Africa. Almost all of these conflicts can be exploited by ISIS but all have their own local dynamics and causes. Seeking to defuse such conflicts (usually triggered by poverty and/or conflict over resources being worsened by climate change) is again a wider agenda for the EU and the United States – but one we must face up to or the consequence will be regular outbreaks of Islamist-inspired violence as they manage to insert themselves into existing conflicts.

## **SPECIFIC CHALLENGES FOR THE UNITED STATES**

One real frustration for U.S. policymakers is that ideally, Libya is something that EU or European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would be able to take the lead on. However, partly due to a fear of sustained intervention and partly as the issue of refugees has become entangled in the domestic politics of most EU states, this is unlikely. Italy is the most directly affected, has some colonial links to Libya (though these were never as deep as French engagement with Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco), and has made sustained efforts to mitigate the refugee crisis. Other EU states have provided some funding to help Italy with this burden but, like the United Kingdom, tend to frame the issue as one of stopping migration across the Mediterranean rather than providing safe passage. Equally, if only briefly, Italy was prepared to take more direct action against ISIS in conjunction with Egypt before backing down under pressure from other EU states and the United States.<sup>19</sup>

This suggests that without direct U.S. leadership, the situation in Libya will remain chaotic. ISIS has been driven out of Sirte and its other strongholds but the situation will continue to offer them opportunities—as noted earlier, Libya is a poorly governed state, with porous borders, copious stocks of weapons, and various sources of income that the group can divert to its own coffers. The Obama administration was cautious about direct and substantial military intervention, partly because it could provide ISIS with a cause and an easily reached enemy, and partly because military intervention might derail the existing attempts to forge a government of national unity.<sup>20</sup>

To add to the complexity, it should be noted that many of the opportunities that ISIS can exploit are the product of long-standing issues. Libya has been notionally unified since the arrival of the Ottomans, was administered as a unitary Italian colony, and was created as a unitary state in 1951. However, this is not to deny that there are profound and long-standing differences between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica and even more between the coastal regions and the sub-Saharan south. In effect, the ongoing problems of two governments and of local militias being unwilling to give up the power they acquired after the fall of Gaddafi are not simply the actions of ambitious politicians. They reflect long-standing difficulties and any attempt to mediate has to take this into account.

Equally, on Libya's borders, the wider tensions between Muslim and Christian communities in the sub-Saharan are long-standing—and made worse by the relative discrimination against the Tuareg across the region. Gaddafi intervened in these crises and civil wars in the 1970s and 1980s, so there is precedent for Libyan interaction within the region.

In turn, these tensions are being made worse by the impact of climate change reducing crop yields and intensifying disputes over access to water.<sup>21</sup> Thus, there will remain ample regions where conflict is ongoing or a threat, even without the intervention of ISIS, unless wider steps are taken to help sub-Saharan Africa manage its current problems. Without help, it is estimated that agricultural productivity will halve in the next decade, in the region, triggering conflicts over the remaining sources of food and water. On the other hand, a report for the EU argued that “for each dollar invested in safe drinking water, three to four dollars are generated, depending on the region and technology available.”<sup>22</sup>

Framing the question of how to deal with ISIS in Libya as purely a local matter needing the correct combination of military and diplomatic actions is too limited an approach. However, while dealing with Libya in isolation is a flawed approach, there is an important need to remove ISIS from Libya for all the reasons outlined earlier in this report. The discussion below tries to separate out the diplomatic from the military options. This is slightly artificial as neither work in isolation.

## Diplomatic Options

So far, in common with the EU, the Obama administration was unwilling to intervene too directly in the military conflict against ISIS, preferring to pursue diplomatic initiatives to resolve the domestic chaos that emerged after 2011. In general, there is much to commend in this approach but it needs two key conditions. First, the process has to be actively managed, as it is clear the Libyan groups by themselves are unlikely to reach a compromise and second, it cannot be an unending process.<sup>23</sup> The latter is perhaps the key criticism that can be levied at the various UN and EU attempts so far. As noted earlier, the GNA framework, in principle, has agreed that the problem lies in addressing these key conditions.

In general terms, the United States should back the current UN focus on ensuring that the GNA is backed as the means to bring about a unitary government. This may cut across the desire to make short-term deals to defeat ISIS at Sirte and ensure it has no base along the Mediterranean but is essential for longer-term stability. Indulging the HOR in their desire to keep control of key institutions and facilities risks repeating the problems that blighted Yemen after its unification in 1990. There, unification brought a division of responsibilities along north-south lines creating dual structures so that senior officials from both existing states kept their jobs.<sup>24</sup> In the short term, the result was political and economic paralysis; in the longer term, it created the conditions first for the civil unrest between 2011 and 2012 and now for the U.S.-Saudi attack on the country. That, repeated on the southern shore of the Mediterranean would be a complete disaster.

At the moment, the Trump administration has no consistent policy on Libya; at various stages in the last 4 months it has mooted the idea of a partition along historical lines.<sup>25</sup> At a press conference with the Italians, the administration suggested the United States should withdraw from the region.<sup>26</sup> More recently, the administration has shifted and returned to a mixture of diplomatic pressure to force agreement between the Libyan groups and military help in the fight against ISIS.<sup>27</sup> Militarily, this shift in policy seems to be connected to a belief that ISIS is on the verge of defeat suggesting at least some U.S. commitment to the long-term governance of Libya.<sup>28</sup>

This matters because by late 2016 ISIS lost control of Sirte and only retains limited influence elsewhere. However, the criminal networks that are now powerful in Libya, combined with the



problem of two administrations in the country, leave ample room for ISIS to extract revenues and to take advantage of future opportunities. As long as the wider political issues are left unresolved, ISIS can continue to find places in the country where it can organize, send its militants to other countries, and earn revenues from criminal activities.

## CONCLUSIONS

At the moment, it appears as if ISIS's brief opportunity to set up territorial domination in Libya has passed. As in Iraq and Syria, it is facing military defeat mainly as it overreached itself originally and alienated all potential allies by its sectarian policies. However, we cannot be complacent. As noted earlier, many ISIS members in Libya were former members of the AQ network and many come from other North African countries. Thus, they may well disperse across the region—which has no shortage of existing conflicts—or switch allegiance again to a new jihadist group.

Equally, within Libya, the criminality that was unleashed with the fall of Gaddafi remains unchecked. The current focus of this criminal activity is a combination of arms smuggling and extracting wealth from the refugees flowing into the country. Thus, ISIS, like AQ, can fund itself very effectively by taking a share of this criminal activity and sustaining some presence in the country.

This leads to two key recommendations, one obvious and perhaps more acceptable, the other will mean a major shift of attitudes by the EU. The first recommendation is simple: backing the GNA as the legitimate government and allocating resources to allow it to both build-up its capacity and lessen the influence of the HOR in the east. The creation of effective governance structures will go a long way toward limiting the scope of ISIS and AQ to operate and earn revenues in Libya.

The second recommendation is more challenging: eliminate the exploitation of refugees and migrants that now sits at the core of criminal activity in Libya. Current EU plans to stop people from crossing into Europe simply will not work and will leave desperate people in a highly vulnerable situation. The refugee crisis did not originate in Libya, and it cannot be stopped in Libya. It originated in conflicts elsewhere in northern Africa and the Middle East, and Libya is simply the current transition route. If we wish to reduce the scope to extract wealth from human misery, it is vital (if politically uncomfortable) that safe routes into Europe be arranged. It also goes without saying that addressing issues such as climate change, desertification, and civil conflict that drive the refugee crisis also needs to be a focus of Western policy.

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