

RISE AND FALL? THE RISE AND FALL OF ISIS IN LIBYA

Azeem Ibrahim

This report argues exploiting the military and political defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Libya to eradicate the group completely from the country and weaken its capacity to act elsewhere in North and sub-Saharan Africa is now possible. In addition, the Libyan conflict continues to have consequences for the political stability of Europe via the pressure the migration flows are putting on the political infrastructure of the continent. In turn, this instability has implications for the United States' European strategy, both insofar as commercial interests are concerned and in US capacity to contain Russian assertiveness on the edges of NATO territory.

Almost a decade after the fall of the Muammar Gadhafi regime, Libya effectively has no government. The UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) is notionally supported by three of the four main factions in the country, and Turkey is now the principal external supporter. But these parties are still squabbling over control of vital regions, the degree of federalism needed, and control of the military.

The situation is made worse by Emirati, Egyptian, Saudi, and now Russian sponsorship of the Libyan National Army (LNA) commanded by General Khalifah Haftar. The army is opposed to the Libya Dawn group having any role in the governance of Libya. In turn, Qatar is happy to fund a range of radical groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood-aligned Libya Dawn, as part of its dispute with the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Libya has traditionally followed an austere form of Sunni Islam which, in the nineteenth century, took the form of the Sanusiyah, a movement that is still influential. The Muslim Brotherhood established itself in Libya in the post-World War II era. Finally, modern Salafi-jihadist groups such as ISIS, al-Qaeda (AQ), and local versions tried to establish themselves using the chaos that has reigned since 2011.

Removing radical Islamist groups from Libya is therefore impractical. But it is important the influence of these groups be minimized within a functioning political system. The Islamic State emerged in Libya in the post-2011 chaos and thrived due to the lack of an effective central government. The group has been driven to the margins, but it can sustain itself from criminal activities, such as people smuggling, drug trafficking, and taxing trade across the Sahara, and it has easy access to weapons and the porous borders of sub-Saharan Africa.

Establishing effective government in Libya should be a priority for these reasons. In effect, ending the civil war between the House of Representatives (HoR) and the LNA in the east and the GNA in the west is the key to preventing any return of ISIS. A pool of potential recruits to ISIS continues to exist due to economic hardship and real grievances, allowing ISIS to recruit, regroup, and reemerge. If we are to exploit the strategic defeat of ISIS in Libya, the overwhelming need is to support the formation of an effective government.

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