



# Islamic State in Libya: From Force to Farce?

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# Introduction

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**T**errorist activity linked to Islamic State (IS) in Libya returned to the spotlight in 2019, directing international attention to the restless country. Having been driven out of its stronghold in the coastal area of Sirte in late 2016,<sup>1</sup> IS has become a point of reference for groups within the country to discredit those they are fighting, a way of identifying the “enemy”.<sup>2</sup> The critical questions now are: What is Islamic State doing in Libya? Is it an organisation in the process of regrouping and regaining strength, potentially even in control of territory? Or is it an uncoordinated bundle of individuals facing asymmetrical threats that will always inhibit its local success? As this paper will argue, IS in Libya is trying to portray itself in a hyperbolic way. While the group’s activity in 2018 has been relatively weak – even more so in 2019 – the volatility and geography of the country as well as prevailing grievances remain pull factors for IS in Libya, which makes the group potentially threatening, even if the organisation is currently negligible.

Eight years have passed since the start of the February Revolution that culminated in the bloody overthrow of the Qaddafi regime in October 2011. Muammar al-Qaddafi had ruled Libya, supported by various alliances, for 42 years. Since his overthrow, initiated by local forces and supported by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the country has experienced almost a decade of turmoil.

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1 Patrick Wintour, “ISIS loses control of Libyan city Sirte”, *The Guardian*, 5 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/05/isis-loses-control-of-libyan-city-of-sirte>.

2 Jacqueline Lacroix, “Social Media and Conflict in Libya: A Lexicon of Hate Speech Terms”, *Development Transformations*, 19 June 2019.

In Libya today, political, military and economic structures are fractured and divided.<sup>3</sup> Politically, the country is split into various institutions claiming legitimacy and exercising control in different regions. This division is significant: the country has a territorial size eleven times that of neighbouring Tunisia, large parts of which are desert terrain, but a population of about six million people, little more than half that of Tunisia.

The Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli in western Libya and headed by Fayeaz al-Serraj is the only internationally recognised governing body.<sup>4</sup> Despite low levels of legitimacy in the country, limited geographical reach, the lack of a loyal military and competing institutions, such as the parliament in the east of Libya (which is situated in Tobruk), the GNA has, up to the current period, been able to act as a de facto Libyan government, particularly on the international stage. This set-up, however, has become increasingly fractured as the main competing power-player, Khalifa Haftar, the head of the Libyan National Army (LNA) or, in the more precise Arabic translation, the Libyan Arab Armed Forces,<sup>5</sup> has seemingly received foreign support from Egypt, the UAE and France,<sup>6</sup> as well as mixed signals coming out of Washington.<sup>7</sup>

Over the course of early 2019 and culminating in advances towards Tripoli in April that year, Haftar and the LNA began to “take control” of Libya’s southern region, setting out from the group’s eastern nucleus (this had been formed after violent fighting in the cities of Benghazi and Derna). On 4 April 2019, the LNA forces took the town of Gharyan, 100 km south of Tripoli, before advancing to the city’s outskirts. Shortly after this, the LNA declared Operation Flood of Dignity,<sup>8</sup> which deployed thousands of men and heavy artillery to the west with the stated aim of capturing the capital and “eradicating terrorism”. The GNA proclaimed the counteroffensive Operation Volcano of Anger, spearheaded by a group of loosely aligned militias.

While to some extent caught by surprise, the military groups in Tripoli were relatively swift to arrange defences, and even fraternised following the counter-mobilisation of western Libyan forces. In December 2019, after eight months of fighting (leading to 284 civilian deaths, 363 injuries and over 300,000 people displaced),<sup>9</sup> the battle for Tripoli was increasingly undertaken by foreign mercenaries from Sudan, Russian and Chad.<sup>10</sup> Such mercenaries might tip the conflict in Haftar’s favour.<sup>11</sup>

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3 Tim Eaton, “Libya’s War Economy: Predation, Profiteering and State Weakness”, Chatham House, 12 April 2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-04-12-libyas-war-economy-eaton-final.pdf>.

4 Next to municipalities which while being polarised also remain recognised governance bodies.

5 al-quwwāt al-musallaha al-‘arabiyya al-libiyya. However, they promote themselves as the Libyan National Army and are usually referred to by this name, especially by international commentators, as it sounds more inclusive by not emphasising the allegedly Arab nature of the organisation.

6 The Economist, “Foreign powers are piling into Libya”, *The Economist*, 12 December 2019, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/12/12/foreign-powers-are-piling-into-libya>.

7 While the State Department has repeatedly signalled support for the GNA, the White House has thwarted such a position. President Trump has telephoned Khalifa Haftar and announced verbal support for Haftar’s alleged fight against terrorists.

8 “Libya: ‘Our army is coming to you’ – LNA forces advance on Tripoli”, LNA spokesperson al-Mismari, 6 April 2019, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3\\_uArUx4po](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3_uArUx4po).

9 Rupert Colville, “Press Briefing on Libya”, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 20 December 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25445&LangID=E>.

10 UN Panel of Experts on Libya, “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Libya submitted in accordance with resolution 2441 (2018)”, 9 December 2019, <https://undocs.org/S/2019/914>.

11 Frederic Wehrey, “With the Help of Russian Fighters, Libya’s Haftar Could Take Tripoli”, *Foreign Policy*, 5 December 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/05/libya-khalifa-haftar-take-tripoli-russian-fighters-help>.

With the strongest military forces in Libya occupied fighting each other in the outskirts of Libya's capital,<sup>12</sup> power vacuums exist in other parts of the country that might allow for radical groups such as IS first to establish themselves militarily and second to impose a form of radical order that offers security and a form of justice for the battered population. This report, however, argues that IS in Libya is trying to portray itself hyperbolically; reports mentioning the threat of IS in Libya are fuelled by an awareness of the group's potential to attract external actors to the country.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the picture is divided: on the one hand, alarmist messages make the rounds, which claim that IS in Libya is advancing.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, further reports emphasise that IS in Libya is currently "the weakest it has ever been".<sup>15</sup> Notwithstanding the recognition of potential threats that IS in Libya could pose nationally and internationally again in the future, this report will concentrate on assessing the group's strength on the ground in Libya in 2018 and 2019, attempting to provide a middle ground between the two diverging narratives by examining IS activities between March 2018 and November 2019. The paper considers existing grievances in Libya, the security vacuum(s) and Libya's geographical appeal, coming to the conclusion that while the group's activity in 2018 and particularly 2019 has been relatively weak, the volatility of the country, the prevailing grievances that let IS flourish in 2015 and 2016, and Libya's proximity to Europe will continue to serve as pull factors for IS in Libya which deem it as potentially threatening, even if the organisation is currently negligible.

The report starts by briefly outlining the history of Islamic State in Libya. It then examines the aspects that draw IS to Libya specifically, as well as its overall agenda. Then, it analyses data collected on IS in Libya in 2018 and 2019 in order to assess the group's strength in the country. The data has been collected via open source methods from social media platforms by the researcher and is analysed in a descriptive manner and contextualised for this report. In the final part of the report, current conflict dynamics are related to the assessment of IS in order to provide an outlook for the terrorist group in the North African country of Libya.

12 Among them the militias that were part of the al-Bunyan al-Marsous coalition that led the brutal fight against IS in Sirte and have not been activated since.

13 Douglas London, "The United States Can't Put Terrorism Behind It", *Foreign Policy*, 5 August 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/05/the-united-states-cant-put-terrorism-behind-it/>.

14 The New York Times, "UN Experts: Libya Is New Focus of Islamic State Extremists", *The New York Times*, 10 December 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2019/12/10/world/middleeast/ap-un-united-nations-libya-1st-ld-writethru.html>; Emily Estelle, "Al-Qaeda and Islamic State will be the winners of the Libyan Civil War", AEI's Critical Threats Project, 10 April 2019, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/al-qaeda-and-the-islamic-state-will-be-the-winners-of-the-libyan-civil-war>; Eric Schmitt, "Warnings of a 'Powder Keg' in Libya as ISIS Regroups", *The New York Times*, 21 March 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/21/world/africa/libya-isis.html>.

15 Aaron Y. Zelin (@azelin), "Libya's civil war creates opening for ISIS return as counterterrorism effort falters <https://wapo.st/2XJc3oX> People have been saying this for a couple of years and there's no signs yet that this is the case. In fact, IS in Libya is at its weakest it's ever been.", 24 November 2019, <https://twitter.com/azelin/status/1198622911495585792>.





# Islamic State and Libya: A Brief History

The Islamic State in Libya developed against the backdrop of a history of Salafi-jihadism<sup>16</sup> in Libya that was already spreading before the 2011 revolution. The roots of Salafi-jihadi groups in Libya can be traced back to the 1990s when the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) developed into one of the biggest challenges to the repressive Qaddafi regime.<sup>17</sup> By 2011, however, these groups were either forced into exile (with some having settled in the United Kingdom or the United States), or were co-opted by the Qaddafi regime under the “Repent and Reform” programme, led by Qaddafi’s eldest son and rumoured heir Saif al-Islam, which aimed to encourage previous regime opponents to repent and renounce violence in exchange for prison releases and potentially even incorporation into the ruling regime.<sup>18</sup>

During the 2011 revolution, Salafi-jihadi groups were neither the main drivers nor the initiators of the uprising against Qaddafi, which induced hundreds of thousands of people to take to the streets across the country, demanding justice and an end to corruption.<sup>19</sup> However, among the forces fighting Qaddafi in 2011 were also hard-line Islamist militias, which prospered the longer the fighting continued and were aided by its particularly violent nature, which had been fuelled by the hard-handed, brutal response of the Qaddafi regime in the early stages of the protests.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the revolutionaries freed many jailed regime opponents, among them some Islamist militants,<sup>21</sup> even as Salafi-jihadi groups such as al-Qaeda aimed to take advantage of the Libyan uprisings and intervened directly by deploying senior members to Libya.<sup>22</sup> Newer Salafi-jihadi groups emerged in Libya that threatened the upcoming elections and aimed to exert influence and impose their agenda.<sup>23</sup> Among those that

16 For a better understanding of Salafi-jihadism, see Shiraz Maher, *A History of Salafi-Jihadism: The History of An Idea* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), which scrutinises the movement in order to understand better the political preferences of the actors described as Salafis, since “although Salafism is a theological distinction, divisions within the tradition are best understood with reference to its fault lines, which principally cut across cleavages of power”.

17 Lydia Sizer, “Libya’s Terrorism Challenge: Assessing the Salafi-Jihadi Threat”, Middle East Institute, 2017, [www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PP1\\_Sizer\\_LibyaCT\\_web\\_0.pdf](http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PP1_Sizer_LibyaCT_web_0.pdf).

18 For more on this, see Noman Benotman, Jason Pack & James Brandon, “Islamists”, in Jason Pack (ed), *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qadhafi Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), in which they elaborate on the history of the LIFG. In short, the group originated with Libyans returning from fighting against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan who chose Qaddafi as their next target. After the regime discovered an LIFG cell in 1995, the group found itself prematurely caught up in a confrontation with the regime and most of its members wound up in prison, to be released about ten years later as part of Saif al-Islam’s “Reform and Repent” programme, in which the regime pledged a series of prisoner releases in exchange for the renouncement of violence and a promise of impartiality towards the Qaddafi regime. Ironically, the last prisoners were released in February 2011, just as the revolution started in eastern Libya, empowering some former LIFG members to feature in the revolution from the start. These men developed into an organised cohort during the revolution and consequently decided to run for office. They realised the importance of getting into key positions in the emerging political apparatus. This newly developed political class within the Muslim Brotherhood and among former LIFG members, however, faces a crucial struggle against those jihadis who reject any form of political participation, including Ansar al-Shariah groups and IS affiliates.

19 *ibid.*

20 Alex Crawford, *Colonel Gaddafi’s Hat* (HarperCollins: New York, 2012).

21 Nic Robertson & Paul Cruickshank, “Islamic Militants Among Prisoners Freed from Libyan Jail,” CNN, 26 August 2011, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/08/26/libya.militants.analysis/index.html>

22 For example, senior Libyan leader Abu Anas al-Libi to form a Libyan affiliate in 2011, Estelle 2016.

23 Emily Estelle & Katherine Zimmermann, “Backgrounder: Fighting Forces in Libya”, AEI’s Critical Threats Project, 3 March 2016.

emerged over the course of 2011 were, most prominently, various branches of Ansar al-Shariah with local bases most conspicuously in Benghazi, Derna,<sup>24</sup> and Sirte, in which they managed to carve out areas of influence following the removal of the Qaddafi regime in 2011.<sup>25</sup> The nucleus of Islamic State in Libya started in Derna, the historical hub for Salafi-jihadi activity due its renown in the history of Salafi-jihadi groups in the country. While IS in Libya needed to compete with other Salafi-jihadi groups from the off,<sup>26</sup> thus explaining why its activity was reined in at various instances, IS also benefitted from existing Salafi-jihadi structures and large numbers of defectors, particularly in Sirte.<sup>27</sup>

The rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria was intrinsically linked to local conflict dynamics; the same is true for Libya. Former IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi endorsed the Libyan IS provinces (*wilayat*) of Cyrenaica/Barqa in eastern Libya, Fezzan in southern Libya and Tripoli/Tarabulus in western Libya in November 2014.<sup>28</sup> By January the following year, IS carried out its first eye-catching attack on the Corinthia Hotel,<sup>29</sup> in which many foreigners stayed, thereby starting to communicate their power in Libya.<sup>30</sup> Over the next year, IS expanded in the country. However, by mid-2015, local jihadi groups had expelled IS from its main stronghold in Derna with the aim of monopolising their control.<sup>31</sup> Overall, IS in Libya benefitted from the fact that the vast country offered territories that were barely monitored or even governed by any authority, thus allowing it to create training camps, for instance in the north-eastern desert adjoining Egypt; this infrastructure enabled the group to attack and establish cells across Libya.<sup>32</sup>

The area around Sirte rose over the course of 2015 to be IS's strongest province outside the core territory of Iraq and Syria.<sup>33</sup> The dominance of IS as the ruling force in Sirte developed in parallel to the national civil war, which was characterised by a military division between, roughly speaking, the western and eastern parts of Libya<sup>34</sup> and deepening political fractionalisation that ended up splitting the country. In the early months of 2015, the fighting was concentrated over the oil facilities of the Sirte Basin. In geographical terms, Sirte was deeply entrenched in this battle and, with the dominant military forces of the east and west more focused on fighting each other, IS managed to exploit the ensuing power vacuum.<sup>35</sup> Other local jihadi competitors,

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24 Ansar al-Shariah's Benghazi and Derna branches were listed as terrorist organisations subject to sanctions under UN Security Council Resolution 2253 (2015) <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/2253-%282015%29>.

25 Sizer, "Libya's Terrorism Challenge".

26 See, for example, *Dabiq*, no. 11 (9 September 2015). The issue includes a three-page interview (pp. 60–63) with the "Delegated Leader for the Libyan Wilāyat", in which he justifies and excuses IS's losses against Salafi-jihadi forces in the city.

27 Author interview via Skype in September 2019 with local councilwoman who lived in Sirte for the duration of IS rule.

28 Estelle & Zimmermann, "Backgrounder".

29 Suliman Ali Zway & David Kirkpatrick, "Group Linked to ISIS Says It's Behind Assault on Libyan Hotel", *The New York Times*, 27 January 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/28/world/middleeast/islamic-state-tripoli-libya-terrorattack.html>.

30 Sizer, "Libya's Terrorism Challenge".

31 Namely groups subsumed under the Derna Mujahedin Shura Council.

32 Estelle & Zimmermann, "Backgrounder"; Andrew Engel, "The Islamic State's Expansion in Libya", *PolicyWatch* 2371, 11 February 2015; Jonathan Stevenson, "Confronting Failed Government and the Islamic State in Libya", *Strategic Comments* 22:1, IISS, 2 March 2016.

33 Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Islamic State's Burgeoning Capital in Sirte, Libya", *PolicyWatch* 2462, 6 August 2015.

34 Libya's national civil war of 2014 is commonly associated with the two constellations of "Libya Dawn": first, a western-based coalition of armed groups with Islamist inclinations, which controlled towns that were very active in the 2011 revolution, most prominently Misrata; second, "Operation Dignity", an eastern-based coalition of some former regime units, prominent tribal forces and federalists, most of them subsumed under the LNA (Frederic Wehrey & Emad Badi, "A Place of Distinctive Despair", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 8 August 2018).

35 Wehrey & Badi, "A Place of Distinctive Despair".

most prominently Ansar al-Shariah members in Sirte,<sup>36</sup> started fearing the encroachment of Operation Dignity forces and hence sought to align themselves with stronger forces.<sup>37</sup> IS in Libya managed to portray itself as what they longed for: a jihadi force not characterised by gradualism and with clear support from the IS core<sup>38</sup> that pushed for an unambiguous vision of governing. Ultimately, IS outmanoeuvred Ansar al-Shariah in Sirte and many members pledged allegiance (*baya*) to the self-proclaimed Caliph Baghdadi.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, the city of Sirte carries its own significance. As the hometown of Muammar al-Qaddafi, many local tribes are allied with the regime and Sirte became an emblem, a focal point for ire, for many in post-revolutionary Libya. It was also the literal target of anti-Qaddafi forces and NATO airpower.<sup>40</sup> Following the overthrow of the regime, it was clear that Sirte had ended up on the wrong side of history and the victorious forces (many of them from Misrata) enacted revenge, such as detentions and executions, disrupting the existing social fabric of the city.<sup>41</sup> IS's offer of violent rule provided local forces with retribution mechanisms to what they considered unfair treatment after 2011.<sup>42</sup> This rationale by local tribes and communities was hence not driven by a bona fide alignment with IS's goals and ideology but rather an opportunistic cooperation focusing on short-term benefits.<sup>43</sup>

IS's presence in Sirte was ended in December 2016 when the group was militarily defeated by Libyan forces under the umbrella of the *al-Bunyan al-Marsous*<sup>44</sup> operation room, with US airstrikes from Operation Odyssey proving crucial for the Libyan ground offensive.<sup>45</sup> Ever since that territorial defeat in Sirte, IS in Libya shifted first to being seen as a refuge for IS forces under pressure in Iraq and Syria;<sup>46</sup> secondly, it was viewed as a possible staging post to threaten Europe due to Libya's geographical proximity with one of the main migrant routes to Europe;<sup>47</sup> thirdly, it was seen as a network of sleeper cells waiting for the right opportunity

36 Ansar al-Shariah in Libya is a Salafi-jihadi group that formed in the aftermath of the 2011 Libyan revolution. It has connections to al-Qaeda and was mostly active in Benghazi and Derna. However, an allegedly independent group also formed in Sirte; Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, "Ansar al-Shariah (Libya)", [https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/ansar-al-shariah-libya#text\\_block\\_18854](https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/ansar-al-shariah-libya#text_block_18854); Frederic Wehrey, "When the Islamic State Came to Libya", *Atlantic Council*, 10 February 2018.

37 Interview with Fawzi Mohammed Bashir al-Ayat, *Al Alan TV*.

38 "Abraz al-ābā' al-rūhyyūn [dā'ish yazhar fī sirt al-lībyah]" [One of ISIS's most prominent spiritual fathers appears in Sirte in Libya], 22 February 2015, <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/north-africa/libya/2015/02/22/%D8%A3%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A2%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AD%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%80-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4-%D9%8A%D8%B8%D9%87%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9.html>; The publication in the September 2015 issue of *Dabiq*, IS's flagship magazine, of an interview in Sirte with the late emir of IS in Libya underscores the importance of Sirte to IS's presence in Libya; Estelle & Zimmermann, "Backgrounder".

39 Author interview via Skype in September 2019 with local councilwoman who lived in Sirte for the duration of IS rule.

40 Wehrey and Badi, "A Place of Distinctive Despair".

41 Charles Lister, "Competition Among Violent Extremists: Combating an Unprecedented Threat", *ANNALS AAPSS* 668, November 2016.

42 Author interview via Skype in August 2019 with two students who lived in Sirte for the duration of IS rule.

43 Estelle & Zimmermann, "Backgrounder".

44 Translates to "solid, well-built structure/construction/wall" and was a coalition of Libyan forces, many from Misrata.

45 Wintour, "ISIS loses control of Libyan city Sirte".

46 Rikar Hussein & Nisan Ahmado, "Islamic State Regrouping in Libyan Desert, Experts Warn", *VOA Extremism Watch*, 29 September 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/islamic-state-regrouping-libyan-desert-experts-warn>; Geoff Porter, "How Realistic is Libya As an Islamic State 'Fallback'?" *CTC at West Point*, 17 March 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/how-realistic-is-libya-as-an-islamic-state-fallback>.

47 Christopher Livesay & Alexander Pavone, "ISIS Regroups to Attack a Fragmented Libya", *PBS Newshour*, 29 September 2018, [www.pulitzercenter.org/reporting/isis-regroups-attack-fragmented-libya](http://www.pulitzercenter.org/reporting/isis-regroups-attack-fragmented-libya); Inga K. Trauthig, "Assessing the Islamic State in Libya: The current situation in Libya and its implications for the terrorism threat in Europe", paper presented at the third conference of the European Counter Terrorism Centre's Advisory Network on terrorism and propaganda, 9–10 April 2019, at Europol Headquarters, The Hague.

to rise again.<sup>48</sup> Following the expulsion from Sirte, the group has been unable to build a proper base or even to govern in Libya. Instead the group is chased around the country: following the loss of its base near Ghodwa, in the south of the country, the group moved to Haruj and began operating again in April 2019, until it was expelled again by the LNA. The next section will explore why such a group as IS has interest in establishing itself in a country like Libya.

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<sup>48</sup> Sudarsan Raghavan, "Libya's civil war creates opening for ISIS return as counterterrorism effort falters", *The Washington Post*, 24 November 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/libyas-civil-war-creates-opening-for-isis-return-as-counterterrorism-effort-falters/2019/11/21/e78745c0-056c-11ea-9118-25d6bd37dfb1\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/libyas-civil-war-creates-opening-for-isis-return-as-counterterrorism-effort-falters/2019/11/21/e78745c0-056c-11ea-9118-25d6bd37dfb1_story.html).

# Why does Islamic State have an Interest in Libya?

## A Global Organisation Shaped by Regional and Local Circumstances

**A**n understanding of the overall situation in Libya is relevant for this paper as IS does not operate in a vacuum but rather aims to manoeuvre strategically, trying to capitalise on local opportunity structures. The rationale behind IS's activities in Libya will now be explored, with a view to answering these questions: why does IS have an interest in Libya? Which regional and local factors make Libya a favourable or unfavourable territory? How does IS in Libya link to the organisation more broadly?

In terms of the last question, in an attempt to portray itself as a global terrorist organisation, IS continuously works on enhancing its media footprint. For example, signalling strength after territorial defeats is vitally important for its survival and the continued appeal of the group.<sup>49</sup> In particular, IS has grown into a terrorist group that excelled at media strategy and output with some analysts even arguing that, for IS, “propaganda production and dissemination is at times considered to be even more important than military jihad”.<sup>50</sup> The Libyan province has been included in IS propaganda regularly. In a video share in April 2019, for example, the now deceased IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi stated that Africa was an important location for the group's future operations, emphasising that IS could be effective in Libya, despite losing Sirte in 2016, and praising IS's revenge attacks in Fuqaha following its defeat in al-Baghuz, Syria.<sup>51</sup> In short, IS in Libya is utilised in general IS propaganda for amplification purposes. In addition, IS in Libya has continued to stay actively engaged in propaganda output itself, particularly following its expulsion from Sirte. However, the decreased influence of IS on the ground in Libya does not escape such well-regarded analysts as Daniele Raineri, who detects reused material in newer media output. In the latest IS video from Libya, for example, the group has recycled footage of raids, claiming more activity and influence than it currently has in the country.<sup>52</sup>

Generally speaking, conducting attacks, albeit small-scale, and keeping media operations running is part of IS's well-known slogan “Remaining and Expanding”.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, even after the expulsion

49 Pieter Nanninga, “Branding a Caliphate in Decline: The Islamic State's Video Output (2015–2018)”, *ICCT Research Paper*, 24 April 2019, <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/ICCT-Nanninga-Branding-a-Caliphate-in-Decline-April2019.pdf>.

50 Charlie Winter, “Media Jihad: The Islamic State's Doctrine for Information Warfare”, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 13 February 2017, [icsr.info/2017/02/13/icsr-report-media-jihad-islamic-states-doctrine-information-warfare](https://icsr.info/2017/02/13/icsr-report-media-jihad-islamic-states-doctrine-information-warfare).

51 Al-Furqan Media Network, 29 April 2019.

52 Daniele Raineri (@DanieleRaineri), “Latest video of the Islamic State in Libya released today, 31 mins, mostly footage of the raids in al Fuqaha and Ghadduwah, between April and May this year. The quality is excellent, we already have the pictures though. In short: same soup, just reheated”, 4 December 2019, <https://twitter.com/DanieleRaineri/status/1202267287752970240>

53 Mina al-Lami, “Where is the Islamic State group still active around the world?”, BBC Monitoring, 27 March 2019, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-47691006](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-47691006).

from Sirte, IS has had an interest in maintaining its presence in Libya by erecting checkpoints, committing abductions and disseminating propaganda that references IS activity in Libya via al-Naba', its newsletter, or propaganda videos in order to counter the image of alleged defeat. Even small activities can be exploited to oppose the image of absolute defeat.

In terms of international links, the high influx of foreign fighters has been a defining characteristic for IS in Libya.<sup>54</sup> By now, Libya has entered the annals of history as the fourth-largest foreign-fighter mobilisation in international Salafi-jihadism.<sup>55</sup> Again, capturing local idiosyncrasies, the Libyan foreign fighters' contingents were characterised by Libya's geographical position. Sub-Saharan Africans came to constitute a large part of Libya's foreign fighters, a new trend, since prior to this point East and West Africans had mostly stayed preoccupied with local insurgencies in their home countries.<sup>56</sup> Still, the greatest numbers of foreign fighters came from Libya's western neighbour, Tunisia.<sup>57</sup> IS's establishment of the Caliphate in 2014 acted as its main recruitment tool and IS in Libya relied mainly on foreigners for their leadership: mostly Iraqis and Tunisians have held top positions, maintaining close ties between the Libyan branch and the core group in Iraq and Syria.<sup>58</sup> Overall, IS in Libya was dominated by non-Libyans and therefore created the impression that, even as the movement has spread and is active in Libya, it is not "of Libya".<sup>59</sup> At the same time, however, IS in its heyday in Sirte was reliant on and staffed by significant numbers of Libyans, many of them previous members of Ansar al-Shariah who pledged allegiance to Baghdadi.<sup>60</sup> Lastly, linkages between fighters in the 2011 revolution who travelled to Syria after Qaddafi was defeated added another layer to the already diverse Salafi-jihadi structures in Libya that at least IS was able to partially capitalise on.<sup>61</sup>

In January 2015, an obscure Libyan IS member called Abu Irbhim al-Libi elaborated on the importance of Libya in terms of its geographical location. In a work entitled "Libya: The Strategic Gateway for the Islamic State", al-Libi explains that "Libya looks upon the sea, the desert, mountains, and six states: Egypt, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Algeria and Tunisia ... It is the anchor from which Africa and the Islamic Maghreb can be reached."<sup>62</sup> Another IS writer, Abu Moaz al-Barqawi (of Barqa), explains in a note entitled "Come to the fold of the caliphate"

54 Interview with Martin Kobler, "German UN Envoy on Islamic State's Rise 'We Simply Can't Give Up on Libya'", *Der Spiegel*, 4 February 2016, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/german-un-envoy-martin-kobler-on-spread-of-is-in-libya-a-1075475.html>.

55 Only behind the ongoing war in Syria, the Afghan jihad of the 1980 and 1990s, and the 2003 Iraq War; Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Others: Foreign Fighters in Libya", Policy Notes, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* PN 45, 2018.

56 Zelin, "The Others".

57 UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Preliminary Findings by the United Nations Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries on Its Official Visit to Tunisia – 1 to 8 July 2015", <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16219>.

58 "Statement from Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook on Libya airstrike", US Department of Defense, 19 February 2016, <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/658458/statement-from-pentagon-press-secretary-peter-cook-on-libya-airstrike>; "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Gen. Rodriguez in the Pentagon Briefing Room on Ebola Response", US Department of Defense, 3 December 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/606973>.

59 Jack Moore, "5,000 Foreign Fighters Flock to Libya as ISIS Call for Jihadists", *Newsweek*, 3 March 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/5000-foreign-fighters-flock-libya-isis-call-jihadists-310948>; Lachlan Wilson & Jason Pack, "The Islamic State's Revitalization in Libya and its Post-2016 War of Attrition", *CTC Sentinel*, March 2019.

60 "Akhbār ḥṣryyah: qiyādiyy fi tanẓīm dā'sh kayfa tammat bay'at #dā'ish fi #Libyā" [Exclusive news: an ISIS leader reveals the manner in which allegiance is pledged in Libya], 25 August 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfMgfk5mr5U>.

61 See for example Sam Najjair's personal account "Soldier for a Summer: One Man's Journey from Dublin to the Frontlines of the Libyan Uprising", *Hachette Books Ireland*, 2013. In this, he describes his personal journey, but also Mehdi al-Harati's journey. Harati became commander of a Libyan brigade fighting against the Syrian government called Liwā' al-Ummah (Banner of the Nation) but returned back to Libya in 2014.

62 Quoted in *ibid.*

that IS seeks to eliminate the Tunisian, Libyan and Egyptian borders to create something along the lines of the “Euphrates Province” in Syria and Iraq.<sup>63</sup> Most recently, a speech released by IS-controlled al-Furqan Media by its new spokesman Abu Hamza al-Qurashi referred to IS being at the “thresholds of Europe”<sup>64</sup> – most likely a reference to IS in Libya.

In addition to IS’s interest in countering its territorial losses in Libya (following additional losses in Iraq and Syria), IS views the Libyan situation itself as fertile and attractive for several reasons. First, different parts of Libya have faced intermittent security vacuums that fluctuated and been impacted by local developments as well as foreign interests and interventions. Re-examining the rise of IS in the city of Sirte in 2015, one finds that the key alliances the group formed with some elements of the disgruntled tribes, along with its brutal tactics, were crucial to its success.<sup>65</sup> Similar processes of converting local grievances into opportunities fed into IS’s attempts at expansion in other parts of the country. This included IS members aligning with local smugglers in Fezzan in the south of Libya, a region that has been structurally disadvantaged and marginalised in the battle between eastern and western forces.<sup>66</sup>

With Libya’s future at a critical crossroads, it is feared that similar opportunities will re-emerge and IS will once again have a chance to expand.<sup>67</sup> A potential harbinger of this outcome is IS activity recorded from early April 2019 onwards, when Khalifa Haftar started his offensive on Tripoli.<sup>68</sup> However, the group’s activities did not pick up in a significant manner. Thus, eight months on, no relevant revitalisation of IS in Libya can be directly connected to Haftar’s offensive. Still, while it has lost territorial control in Libya, IS has never fully vanished, even though it does not exercise governing duties in a demarcated territory. With the LNA and powerful militias in western Libya occupied with fighting one another, IS will naturally continue to use this to its advantage. At the same time, however, the widespread presence of a plethora of other violent actors in Libya also means that structurally IS will be perpetually constrained by other armed factions in the country. While most jihadi groups differ in their aims and social composition, they still compete for the same recruits.<sup>69</sup>

Libya’s geographical location will always remain attractive for such a group as IS because it facilitates the recruitment of fighters from sub-Saharan Africa, intersects with relevant trading and smuggling routes,<sup>70</sup> and is close to the shores of Europe. Libya has exhibited a significant availability of weaponry since 2011; in recent years the situation has been exacerbated due to blatant but well-documented

63 Anonymous, 31 January 2015, <https://justpaste.it/j6g5>.

64 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “Islamic State’s Appointment of New Leader: Translation and Notes”, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/10/islamic-state-appointment-of-new-leader>.

65 Lister, “Competition Among Violent Extremists”.

66 Nate Wilson & Inga K. Trauthig, “Understanding Libya’s South Eight Years After Qaddafi”, United States Institute of Peace, 23 October 2019, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/10/understanding-libyas-south-eight-years-after-qaddafi>.

67 Hassan Morajea & Benoit Faucon, “In Libya, Islamic State Seeks Revival in Gateway to Europe”, *Wall Street Journal*, 17 September 2017, [www.wsj.com/articles/in-libya-isis-seeks-revival-in-gateway-to-europe-1505678113](http://www.wsj.com/articles/in-libya-isis-seeks-revival-in-gateway-to-europe-1505678113).

68 Inga K. Trauthig (@inga\_kris), “In Libya IS has never vanished now with #LNA and powerful western militias occupied with fighting one another, #IslamicState will naturally try to use it to its advantage: Attack in Fuqaha yesterday serves as a warning”, 9 April 2019, [https://twitter.com/inga\\_kris/status/1115532785631027200](https://twitter.com/inga_kris/status/1115532785631027200).

69 Sizer, “Libya’s Terrorism Challenge”.

70 Fiona Mangan & Matthias Nowak, “The West Africa–Sahel Connection Mapping Cross-border Arms Trafficking”, *Small Arms Survey*, December 2019, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-BP-West-Africa-Sahel-Connection.pdf>.

breaches of the UN arms embargo.<sup>71</sup> In general, the porous borders that have resulted from the non-existent national state authority – which would in any case normally have faced challenges in controlling the borders of an extraordinarily large territory – allows for local actors to negotiate the terms of border management. Unsurprisingly, the agenda and interests of such actors are often not defined by national, communal objectives but rather incentivised by group-related profit of one form or another. In addition, and again linked to Libya's fractured political landscape, the country contains large stretches of deserted no-man's-land with border crossings set up by LNA forces and other militias, signalling the competition between Libya's rival governments in the east and west.

In terms of ideological susceptibility, Libya is not characterised by a sectarian divide that could be exploited by Sunni extremists, as is the case, for example, in Iraq. However, widespread grievances among different parts of the population, due either to frustration at a lack of opportunities and feelings of exclusion or to fears of potentially inimical armed groups, offer a breeding ground for extremist recruitment. At the same time, taking a longer-term perspective, military campaigns characterised by human rights violations may provide IS with opportunities to capitalise on social fissures and to perpetuate instability.<sup>72</sup>

Having outlined some key characteristics of IS interests in Libya, the next section moves to the centrepiece of the paper, namely analysing the current status of IS in Libya based on newly collected data. With this analysis, the conundrum of IS in Libya can be explored: IS appears to get weaker and weaker even as some of the key variables that facilitate the rise of jihadi movements (local grievances, weak state authority, abundance of weaponry) are present. In sum, IS in Libya in 2019 suffers from a massive discrepancy between what they want to be and what they manage to be.

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71 UN Panel of Experts on Libya, "Final report of the Panel of Experts in accordance with paragraph 14 of resolution 2362 (2017)", 8 September 2018, [www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1970/panel-experts/reports](http://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1970/panel-experts/reports).

72 BBC Arabic, "Libya War Crimes shared on social media", 1 May 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/aw/world-africa-48105968/libya-war-crimes-videos-shared-on-social-media>.



# How Strong or Weak is Islamic State in Libya?

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## Data and Methodology

**T**his section will outline the data collection process, provide an overview of the dataset, describe the focus of the study and then explain how the data analysis was approached. The assessment of IS's current strength in Libya derives predominantly from the interpretation of a database that has been maintained since January 2018.

### *Data Collection*

Data was collected using open-source-based research tools, such as Tweetdeck and Facebook Search. The searches were guided by a keyword list in English and Arabic – some searches combined with operators – that remained the same throughout the research period. The data collection period assessed for this paper was from 1 March 2018 until 31 October 2019. During this period, all Twitter and Facebook posts were collected that claimed IS activity in Libya in the following regards:

- (1) Attacks attributed to IS
- (2) Establishment of checkpoints attributed to IS and/or IS attacks on checkpoints
- (3) Kidnappings attributed to IS

Conversely this means many claims of IS activity did not make it into the database, most markedly among them:

- (1) Arrests of alleged IS members
- (2) Assassination or emancipation of alleged IS members
- (3) Release of propaganda material by IS
- (4) Rumours of alleged IS and al-Qaeda cooperation;
- (5) Failed IS attacks (which are prominently featured especially on LNA-affiliated accounts)

The decision not to include the release of propaganda material in this database, which would help to indicate IS's strength on the ground in Libya, was taken due to the fact that such propaganda material's origins are often difficult to determine and, by definition, it is a means with which groups willingly exaggerate their stature. However, assessments of this material have been and will continue to be included in later parts of the paper as propaganda material provides valuable, additional glimpses into IS's self-perception and attempts at inflating its relative standing. Similarly, this report has opted not assess IS in Libya based on IS reports of its activity as the group is intrinsically interested in over-reporting its activity. In addition, the reliance on

open-source methods adds to the traceability and replicability of the research. Given the study's focus, retweets or shares picking up alleged IS activity were not included in the count. Comments on the alleged IS activity, however, were considered in the analysis.<sup>73</sup>

### Overview of Dataset

As Table 1 shows, during the twenty-month data collection period, a total of 87 incidents ended up in the database, broken down into the three categories of incidents to be recorded based on the inclusion criteria. The first is IS-affiliated attacks. A total of 40 attacks were noted with a count of 93 IS-inflicted casualties. These IS-affiliated attacks range from high-profile attacks, such as the assault on the National Election Commission on 2 May 2018 that resulted in eleven deaths, including those of two suicide bombers in Tripoli, as well as more low-key – but therefore more frequent – attacks, such as in southern Libya on 23 November 2018, when IS members launched an assault on the town of Tazirbu, resulting in 8 people dead, or on 4 May, when IS attacked the LNA's 160 Brigade Jabril Baba training camp in Sebha, leaving eight LNA members dead.<sup>74</sup>

Next to IS-affiliated attacks, the database records 30 accounts of IS activity aiming to signal presence and strength by erecting checkpoints. Prototypical for this type of activity are, for example, the movements in early October 2018 when IS members erected mobile checkpoints south of the group's previous stronghold, the coastal city of Sirte, along the Qasr Abu-Hadi-Waddan road.

The third and final category of incidents that made it into the database is IS-affiliated kidnappings, which amount to 17 registered kidnappings during the data collection period. These kidnappings incorporate civilian as well as military incidents, such as the kidnapping of two LNA officers while they were attending a social gathering in the desert area near Waddan on 26 June 2018 or the occasion in March 2019 when IS kidnapped three young men allegedly affiliated with local government authorities in Ghodwa, near Sebha.

Table 1

Collection Period	1 March 2018 – 31 October 2019
<b>Total Incidents</b>	<b>87</b>
Attacks	40
IS Movement/Checkpoints	30
Kidnappings	17

<sup>73</sup> While the database is open-source based, the researcher cross-referenced and double checked regularly before entry into the database. Furthermore, internal IS communications were compared with the data that was acquired via open sources. This multi-source approach ensures reasonable reliability of the research results.

<sup>74</sup> For this report no distinction is drawn between civilian and military casualties.

In terms of geographical distribution, an interesting image presents itself: the incidents were almost evenly spread between the eastern, western and southern regions of Libya with a slightly higher number in the western part of Libya due to IS's initial focus on Sirte and the Sirte Basin. This distribution changes, however, after Haftar's offensive on Tripoli in April 2019. At this point the admittedly small number of IS activities become more focused on southern Libya, where IS repeatedly attacks LNA checkpoints, for example, near Zillah and Qatron in late May 2019 and late September 2019 respectively. Overall, the database records 31 incidents in the western region, 31 in the southern region and 25 in the eastern region with the type of attacks being equally spread among the three regions.

Figure 1

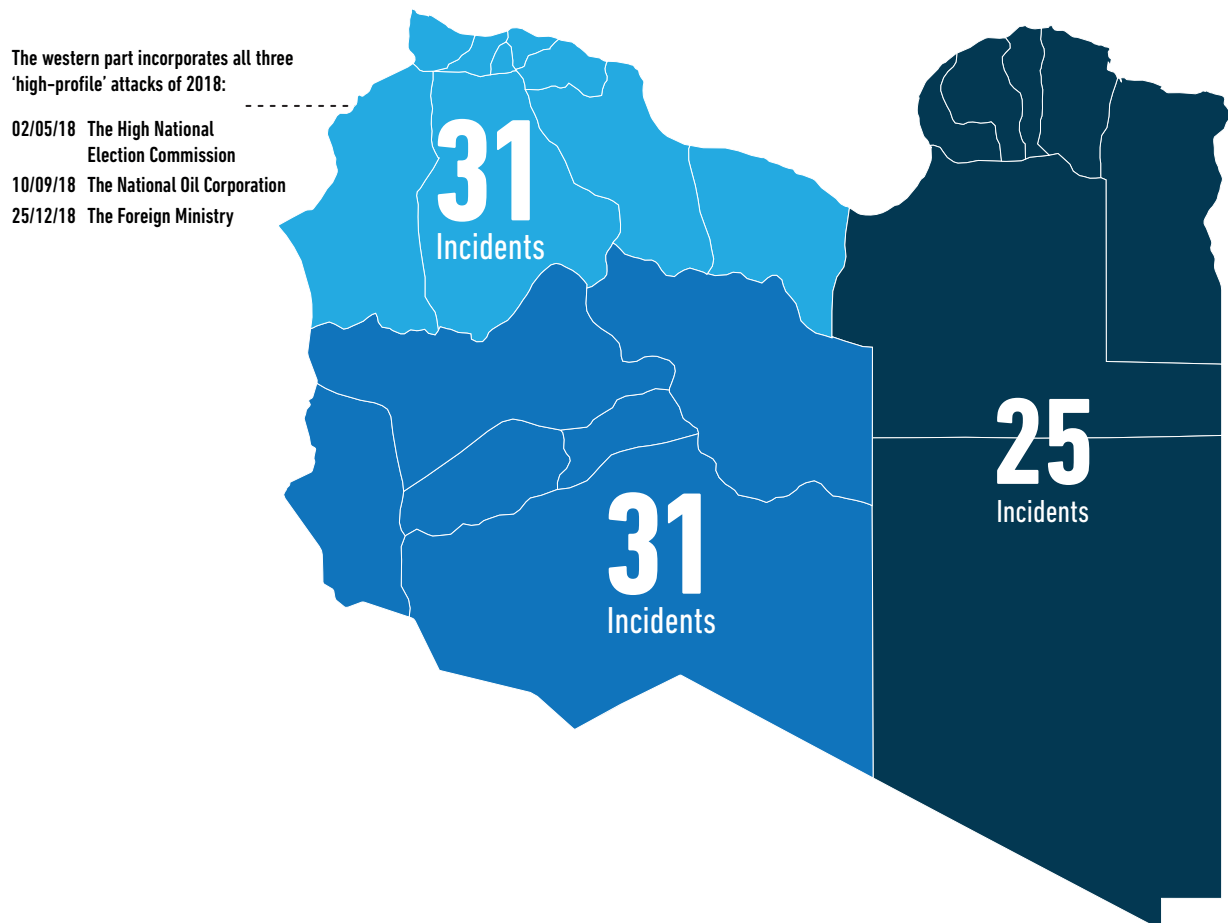


Figure 1 portrays all 87 incidents according to the region in which the incident occurred and the frequency of occurrence. It shows, first, that the incidents occurred pretty proportionately among the regions. Within the regions there are hotspots, such as Sirte in the western region.

## Data Analysis

Using the data collected via open-source research methods, this paper seeks to identify and compare the scale of attacks and the organisational underpinning of the activity, but most importantly it outlines the relevance of such attacks for Libya's future.

The first stage, which is mostly grounded in descriptive numerical analysis, has been outlined above and captures the number of incidents and their distribution, as well as adding qualitative signifiers to the data. While the descriptive numerical analysis was focused on collecting the number of incidents and type of activity, which already carries weight in terms of operational capacity, the qualitative analysis provides additional analytical depth. The qualitative analysis focused first on the scale of a given attack and second on the geographical location of the incidents, which might explain whether IS in Libya is clearly connected with one area or spread across the country.

On the one hand, the numbers of 87 incidents with 93 IS-inflicted casualties (civilian and military) are relatively insubstantial compared to, for example, the month of May 2018 alone, in which The United Nations Support Mission (UNSMIL) recorded 47 civilian casualties inflicted by clashes in Derna, Benghazi, Kufra, Sabha and Al-Zawiya, including the IS attack in Tripoli and the casualties in Tripoli since the start of Haftar's offensive in April 2019.<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, the database exhibits continuous IS activity in the country, dotted by three high-profile attacks in Tripoli over the course of 2018, on the National Election Commission (HNEC), the National Oil Corporation and the Foreign Ministry, and hence shows that IS in Libya has not vanished, but instead manifests itself via (a) high-profile attacks on symbolic state institutions and (b) small campaigns in different patches of the vast desert terrain of Libya. Taken together, IS constitutes a threat to any future progress in Libyan state-building.

The data creates the impression that IS is not currently aspiring to control territory in populated areas in Libya (or even concentrates on controlling one city or region in Libya), but is rather aiming to create insecurity in all parts of the country. IS establishes or attacks checkpoints, raids and occupies urban police stations and has kidnapped local notables for potential prisoner exchanges or ransom on several occasions. In addition, the group carried out the aforementioned three major attacks in 2018. It also tried again in 2018 to take control of parts of the Mabruk oil field, signifying its determination to attack the main source of income in Libya.<sup>76</sup> The overall aim in all parts of the country is to generate a feeling of insecurity and distrust in existing structures, such as the GNA in the west, the LNA in the east, and LNA and regional, tribal structures in the south. The startling attacks in Tripoli all targeted key institutions of Libyan politics. As regards the attack on the electoral commission, the prospect of any democratic procedure like national elections has attracted the attention of those who wish to disrupt such activities, and

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75 United Nations Support Mission to Libya, Human Rights Report on Civilian Casualties – May 2018, <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/human-rights-report-civilian-casualties-may-2018>.

76 OPEC, "Libya's fact and figures", [https://www.opec.org/opec\\_web/en/about\\_us/166.htm](https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/166.htm).

the 2 May attack by IS's Tripoli province is a case in point.<sup>77</sup> The interruptions that IS is able to achieve in the country's political developments exacerbate a feeling of insecurity regarding political processes and dissatisfaction with government services, such as security provision.<sup>78</sup>

Furthermore, IS in Libya needs to be interpreted as one branch of a bigger group with its base in the Levant that, while exhibiting local idiosyncrasies, is still tied to a bigger idea. Therefore, IS in Libya employs a double strategy, since it must (a) show that it implements IS's ideologically driven objectives (i.e. destroying *kufr* in the form of high-profile targets) and (b) remain a relevant force in the country, safeguarding its base in this geographically advantageous position. For example, the attack on the HNEC in May 2018 was claimed by IS first via its Nashir News Agency media outlet on the messaging app Telegram; in a follow-up statement, IS emphasised that the attack in Tripoli was a response to a recent message from the group's central leadership urging attacks on election targets, referring to the IS spokesman's April 2018 speech.<sup>79</sup> The group thus continues to harbour aspirations to increase its visibility by perpetrating attacks on symbolic targets that send strategic messages in line with the group's ideology.

In the current third wave of Libya's civil war, triggered by Haftar's offensive, IS is not the issue at stake. However, the group has survived after it was expelled from Sirte and has been able to assert itself in a context of widespread conflict and violence (such as that seen in the latest escalation). Europe is almost immediately affected by developments in Libya and, if Haftar is not contained, Libya will tumble, once more, into violence. Overall, the instability in western Libya is similar to that experienced in 2014, and the fighting might continue even if Haftar's offensive is averted. This uncertainty could once again strengthen terrorist groups, including IS, which carried out a spate of attacks in Libya in 2018 and has tried to capitalise on the current momentum in May 2019.<sup>80</sup> However, so far, the group has not managed to live up to its aspirations in the post-Sirte era. Of course, this also has to do with several US airstrikes, such as those in late September 2019 that killed 43 alleged IS militants.<sup>81</sup>

In sum, IS in Libya has not vanished but rather manifests itself via (a) noteworthy attacks on institutions connected to the state and (b) less prominent but more frequent activities in desert regions.<sup>82</sup> The attacks in the database and their geographical spread signify that they were attacks driven by favourable circumstances – attacks of opportunity – rather than a coordinated campaign.<sup>83</sup>

77 BBC Monitoring on Twitter, 2 May 2018, [twitter.com/BBCMonitoring/status/991686100799381504](https://twitter.com/BBCMonitoring/status/991686100799381504).

78 International Republican Institute's Center for Insights in Survey Research, *Libya Poll*, 15 May 2019, [www.iri.org/sites/default/files/libya\\_poll\\_january\\_2019.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/libya_poll_january_2019.pdf).

79 "Islamic State spokesman says 'battle has just begun'", *BBC Monitoring*, 23 April 2018, [monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1dp3x67](https://www.monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1dp3x67).

80 Trauthig, "In #Libya IS never vanished – now with #LNA and powerful western militias occupied with fighting one another, #IslamicState will naturally try to use it to its advantage: Attack in Fuqaha yesterday serves as a warning", 9 April 2019, [twitter.com/inga\\_kris/status/1115532785631027200](https://twitter.com/inga_kris/status/1115532785631027200).

81 United States Africa Command, "U.S. Africa Command airstrike targets ISIS-Libya", 30 September 2019, <https://www.africom.mil/media-room/pressrelease/32238/u-s-africa-command-airstrike-targets-isis-libya>.

82 Wilson & Pack, "The Islamic State's Revitalization".

83 Aaron Y Zelin, "The Islamic State in Libya Has Yet to Recover", *Policy Watch* 3222, 6 December 2019.

This two-pronged strategy is harmful to progressive political and institutional developments that aim at Libyan state-building since it jeopardises the already volatile political process.<sup>84</sup> In addition, the presence and activities of IS in Libya have been repeatedly exploited by military actors, such as Haftar, who lump together adversarial forces and denounce them as IS terrorists.<sup>85</sup> In the second Libyan civil war of 2014 Haftar re-emerged, installing himself and the LNA as a committed “anti-Islamist” fighting force. This narrative of “Islamist forces” and “terrorist forces” fighting “anti-Islamist” or “liberal” forces in Libya – with Haftar leading the latter group – has been attacked and shown to be untenable by many analysts over recent years.<sup>86</sup> While there have been occasions in which the LNA was fighting jihadi groups, the narrative is still simplified.<sup>87</sup> However, the attention attracted by fighting supposedly terrorist elements still attracts regional and international backing and will therefore continue to be exploited in a conflict that has come to be defined by international meddling.

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- 84 It is important to mention, however, that the GNA and the Presidential Council were established after major political and military factions in the west and the south of the country agreed on their formation in Tripoli in March 2017. These processes took place relatively peacefully without triggering large-scale violent incidents and various groups have worked with the international community on the fight against IS and illegal migration: Virginie Collombier, “Libya: Moving beyond the transitional mood”, Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping Geopolitical Shifts, Regional Order and Domestic Transformations, *Future Notes* no. 11 (April 2018), [www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara\\_fn\\_11.pdf](http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_fn_11.pdf). Nonetheless, while there has been initial progress in countering IS, such as forcing it out of Sirte in December 2016, the failure of an inclusive deal deepened the prevalent political division, separating the deal’s supporters from its opponents and leading to new fractures within both factions.
- 85 “Widespread use of ‘Daeshi’ in Libya began sometime between 2013 and 2015, when the Islamic State began carrying out operations in the country. In its current usage, it is often employed against anyone who opposes General Haftar and the LNA, falsely conflating any opponents with Islamist extremists.” in Lacroix, “Social Media and Conflict in Libya”, p. 8.
- 86 This narrative is fuelled by all sides: For example, Ali Sallabi has been relying on similar rhetoric and the consequences of this risky game of labelling the competitor a terrorist, is a gamble that many actors are participating in. In addition, external actors were able to be more involved (visibly) partly because of the terrorism labelling game.
- 87 Frederic Wehrey, “Quiet no more”, Carnegie Middle East Centre, 13 October 2016, [carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64846](http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64846).

# Extra-regional Relevance of IS in Libya

## Focus on Europe

While not the only factors, Libya's geographical location in North Africa combined with its borders with sub-Saharan Africa and its vast coastline on the Mediterranean Sea are decisive in leading Libya to become a transit country for migration into Europe.<sup>88</sup> IS in Libya has been taking advantage of vulnerable people stranded in Libya (mostly migrants on their way to Europe) to recruit fighters and possibly radicalise parts of the population. IS's interest in exploiting migrant routes from Libya as a potential entry point to Europe is dangerous for Libya. Looking at previous terrorist attacks in Europe, it is clear that IS has exploited migration paths into the continent,<sup>89</sup> although the exact extent remains difficult to determine. While the infiltration of migrant routes was successfully undertaken by IS, the scale of terrorist infiltration, as far as can be traced, seems to remain less than 1 per cent of the total number of recent asylum seekers.<sup>90</sup> While the current evidence is not sufficient to claim a systematic use of migration routes by terrorists, there are concerns that some terrorists will continue to try to do so. Such concerns can be found both at the EU level as well as among Libyan security officials convinced that IS is working with migrant traffickers.<sup>91</sup> When considering how the dynamics might play out in the future, it is critical to acknowledge that the geographical attractiveness of Libya for terrorist groups like IS will not vanish, nor will its strategic location between sub-Saharan Africa and Europe. Therefore, even though there have been previous crackdowns on the migrant smuggling business in Libya, the opportunity structures are likely to continue to be exploited, and hence Libya's importance will remain. Jihadis have been using these routes to traffic weapons already and might expand their operations by focusing on recruitment to aid in the enterprise.<sup>92</sup> It goes without saying, however, that IS has and will face resistance by existing smuggle networks and IS is unlikely to become really strong in Libya's no-man's land of Fezzan.

88 Council of the European Union, "Central Mediterranean route", 15 March 2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/migratory-pressures/central-mediterranean-route/>.

89 Trauthig, "Assessing the Islamic State in Libya".

90 Sam Mullins, *Jihadist Infiltration of Migrant Flows to Europe: Perpetrators, Modus Operandi and Policy Implications* (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2019), doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-13338-2.

91 Europol, EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2018, p. 28, [www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2018-tesat-2018](http://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2018-tesat-2018); Christopher Livesay & Alexander Pavone, "ISIS Regroups to Attack a Fragmented Libya", PBS Newshour, 29 September 2018, [www.pulitzercenter.org/reporting/isis-regroups-attack-fragmented-libya](http://www.pulitzercenter.org/reporting/isis-regroups-attack-fragmented-libya).

92 Zelin, "The Others".

## Focus on sub-Saharan Africa

IS in Libya seems to have been trying to increase its recruitment efforts regarding migrants of sub-Saharan origin and has seemingly proven successful at it. While fighters from sub-Saharan Africa have been crucial for IS in Libya from the start, especially as foot soldiers,<sup>93</sup> as of 2018 appeals directed at this group to join IS have increased. In early July 2018, IS's branch in eastern Libya, Wilāyat Barqa ("Cyrenaica province"), published a propaganda video with the title *Mawqif al-mawt* ("The Point of Death"), featuring prominently what seem to be sub-Saharan fighters (see below, picture 1). This was the first video from the branch for almost a year, with the previous one released in September 2017. In addition, IS published multiple eulogies in mid-August 2018, one of which was dedicated to Abū Mūsā al-Kīnī (featuring a photo of an IS member possibly of sub-Saharan origin, allegedly from Kenya – see below, picture 2). In this case, not the mere fact of having Kenyans among their members is noteworthy, but rather the fact that he was considered prominent enough to be eulogised in the "Caravans of Martyrs", which for IS is a rare honour. In summary, IS in Libya seems to have identified sub-Saharan Africans as a pivotal recruitment pool for the group's survival and strength. This seems to belie reports of Libya acting as a safety net or safe retreat for IS fighters trying to flee Syria and Iraq. Libya is difficult to reach and too unattractive a territory for a great number of IS members. Instead, the IS presence in Libya continues to be defined by recruitment in neighbouring countries with an emphasis on its southern neighbours.

Looking at Libya as a whole, the ongoing Libyan political crisis has created a security situation in which hybrid state and non-state actors are vying for power. This situation constantly creates opportunities for shifting allegiances due to emerging grievances, alongside practical opportunities such as benefiting from pre-existing migrant routes. As a result, IS in Libya has also managed to maintain its activities and some cells in the country. Such threats signal the importance of security cooperation between Europe and African states. For example, the G5 Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger will be vital in identifying potentially radicalised migrants stuck in Libya and repatriating them.<sup>94</sup>

The current situation of Libya is that of a divided country lacking a national political apparatus linked to a loyal military under civilian oversight. Instead, militias dominate most parts of the country, often catering to their own interests, but caring little about the population as a whole.<sup>95</sup> The conditions under which IS was able to flourish in Libya have not changed drastically. As is the case in Iraq and Syria, as long as there is a market for non-state actors to offer protection and livelihoods to vulnerable populations, jihadist groups will continue to be able to radicalise and recruit, or sometimes benefit from the ad hoc recruitment of individuals or groups seeking protection and livelihood without a preceding process of radicalisation.

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<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*

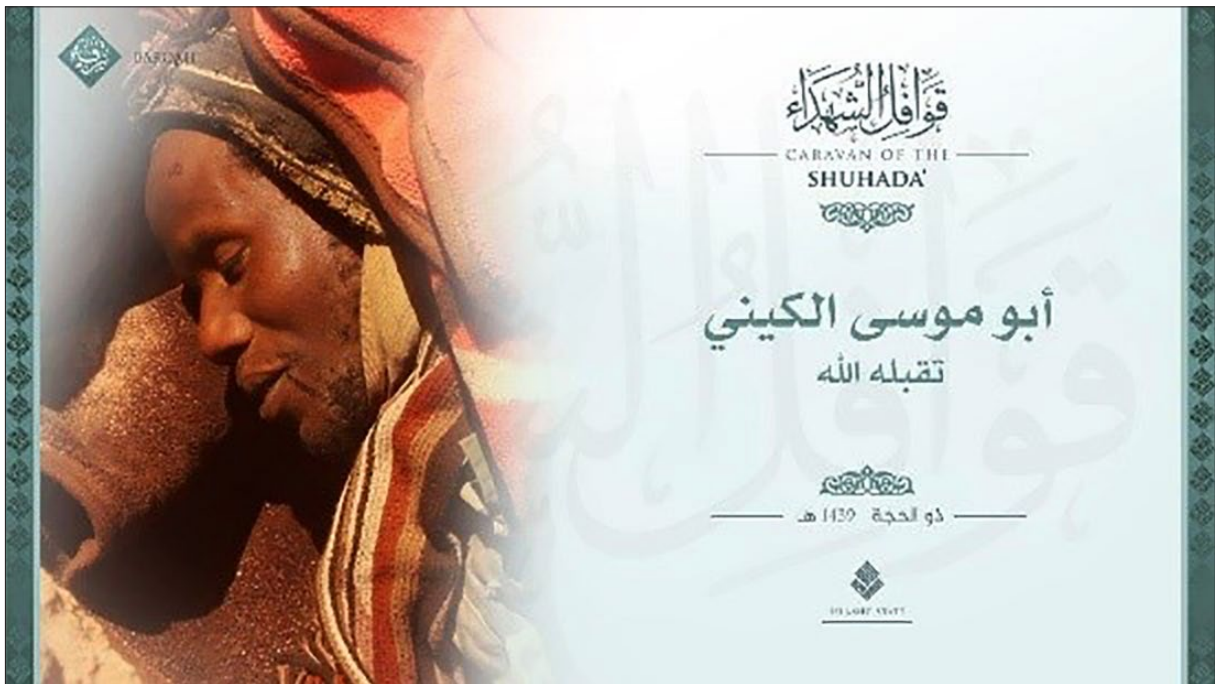
<sup>94</sup> Andrew Lebovich, "Bringing the Desert Together: How to Advance Sahel-Maghreb Integration", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 18 July 2017, [www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/bringing\\_the\\_desert\\_together\\_how\\_to\\_advance\\_sahelo\\_maghreb\\_integration\\_7215](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/bringing_the_desert_together_how_to_advance_sahelo_maghreb_integration_7215).

<sup>95</sup> Claudia Gazzini, "Making the Best of France's Libya Summit", 28 May 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/b58-making-best-frances-libya-summit>.





Picture 1: The Point of Death



Picture 2: Eulogy



## Conclusion and Outlook

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**G**lobally, far fewer attacks associated with IS took place in 2018 and 2019 than in previous years. In Libya, however, IS continues to pose a threat. While the overall number of its fighters may have decreased, IS continues to hold a presence in the country, exploiting the vast territorial size and internal fissures. IS establishes or attacks checkpoints, raids and occupies urban police stations and kidnaps local notables for potential prisoner exchanges or ransom. In addition, the group carried out three major attacks in 2018.

However, IS in Libya is – like any other actor in Libya – affected by local developments as well as foreign interventions. As it stands at the close of 2019, the LNA has pursued a fervent military offensive to “liberate” southern Libya from terrorists and launched an assault on the capital, Tripoli, with the same aim.<sup>96</sup> The more successful the LNA groups are in penetrating southern Libya, the less ability IS will preserve to operate in Fezzan. However, as it stands, the main military players in Libya are occupied with fighting each other, not IS. IS’s weakness in Libya can be credited to the fact that IS tried to take advantage of the Libyan civil war and hence tried to ramp up its activities in April and May 2019 (right after Haftar started his offensive on Tripoli). Now, however, eight months into the conflict, it can be assessed that IS has been unable to take advantage of said conflict on a noteworthy scale. This provides hope that IS in Libya still cannot convince local populations with its ideology or brutality as some foreigners have,<sup>97</sup> and that, this time, local grievances will find resolutions that differ from cooperating with or joining IS. The potential for IS relocating or enlarging its presence in the Sirte Basin again cannot be ruled out; neither can the possibility of IS fighters shifting alliances and finding agreements with local players that allow them to continue to remain in the desert area of southern Libya. However, at the current stage such potential remains exactly that. On the other hand, the fighting that has been holding Libya captive since April 2019 continues to have a severe impact on the local population. While a pathway towards a ceasefire remains invisible, it is against the backdrop of a series of International Human Rights violations that local Libyans have begun to speculate that radical groups like IS might not be seen as far more terribly cruel anymore.

At the same time, in the longer-term perspective, the LNA’s offensive could offer IS the opportunity to exploit social fissures and perpetuate instability. As Libya researcher Lydia Sizer observed in 2017: “Khalifa Hifter’s rhetoric and tactics give Salafi-jihadis an existential threat to rally around and could make such groups attractive to disaffected members of more moderate Islamist groups”.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, even Qaddafi’s totalitarian ideology and

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<sup>96</sup> “Libya: ‘Our army is coming to you’ – LNA forces advance on Tripoli”, LNA spokesperson al-Mismari, 6 April 2019, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3\\_uArUx4po](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3_uArUx4po).

<sup>97</sup> Zelin, “Islamic State in Libya”.

<sup>98</sup> Sizer, “Libya’s Terrorism Challenge”.

his political system were never able to eliminate the influence of local tribes and he never achieved full penetration on the scale he had envisaged, thereby proving Libya's engrained local loyalties. Also, IS in Libya is shrewd in benefiting from lingering grievances, often originating in perceived (or actual) political isolation, a fact that explains the IS establishment in Sirte.<sup>99</sup> IS needed Libyans from within to grow as they did and the lack of stability and continuing conflict between different political camps helped IS, but the future of IS in Libya depends on if they are ready and prepared to seek opportunities and have a way to impact local dynamics to their favour.

Overall, Libya at the close of 2019 is embroiled in a civil war marked by significant foreign meddling.<sup>100</sup> The conflict is therefore characterised by almost full-scale mobilisation of local Libyan forces to the Tripoli frontlines on the one hand, and foreign interventions, either via foreign fighters such as Russian mercenaries or foreign weapons such as drones, on the other. IS has not been able to take advantage of this situation yet and, furthermore, has been weakened by repeated US airstrikes, making internal propaganda outputs<sup>101</sup> in a desperate attempt to exaggerate its strength and influence (similar signs of weakness of the Libya province could be traced to the fact that IS in Libya pledged allegiance to the new emir on 15 November, almost three weeks after Baghdadi's death).

Overall, local characteristics have curbed IS's expansion in Libya: Libyans had been influenced ideologically in a particular way before and after 2011 and IS did not grasp these local idiosyncrasies and grievances adequately.<sup>102</sup> Still, with no unifying, effective Libyan government and a susceptible lack of reliable law enforcement in most parts of the country, the militia heads often offer at least some sort of order, tailoring themselves towards a national audience and to outside powers (as immigration control partners or counterterrorism forces). Most profoundly, the challenge remains of dealing with extremism in a way that does not empower counter-dynamics or come at the expense of a legitimate state led by a civilian head of state.

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99 Haala Hweio, "Tribes in Libya: From Social Organization to Political Power", *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 2, no. 1 (2012), pp. 111–21.

100 Nathan Vest, "Can Anything Stop the Flow of Advanced Weapons into Libya?", *Defense One*, 13 December 2019, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2019/12/can-anything-stop-flow-advanced-weapons-libya/161892/>.

101 For example, the propaganda video "And Drive Them Out from Where They Drove You Out" released in December 2019.

102 Wehrey, "When the Islamic State Came to Libya".





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