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LIBYA, EXTREMISM, AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF COLLAPSE

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THE SOUFAN CENTER
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Key Findings

- Following the failure to form a unity government in Libya, the country will continue to face monumental hurdles to stabilization.
- Existing divides between the East and West of Libya have been exacerbated by the security situation in the country.
- The absence of rule of law and the high levels of violence in Libya—when combined with the proliferation of weapons—have allowed violent extremist groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda to thrive.
- Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are both utilizing Libya as a safe-haven from which to launch operations against neighboring countries.
- Libya is becoming a new destination for foreign jihadist fighters, especially those from neighboring Tunisia.
- The expansion of black market networks in Libya has moved economic drivers away from centralized control, and empowered criminal and extremist elements within the country.
- Control of energy infrastructure is a top priority for all parties in Libya, especially extremist groups, threatening economic stability.
- Extremist groups have effectively coopted the black market networks in Libya, drawing revenue from the smuggling of migrants, weapons, drugs, and oil.
- Approximately 144,000 migrants attempted to cross the Central Mediterranean to Europe in 2015, the vast majority embarking from Libya.
- Continued instability in Libya will see the formalization of black market networks and the entrenchment of violent extremist groups, lowering the prospects for peace.

Introduction

On December 17, 2015, representatives from Libya's rival governments in Tobruk and Tripoli signed a UN-brokered agreement in Morocco, pledging to form a unity government within 40 days. The international community heralded the agreement as a new beginning for Libya, and expressed hope for the country's future. On January 19, 2016, the Tunisia-based Unity Presidential Council—formed under the UN agreement—nominated a 32-member cabinet composed of members of both competing governments. Less than a week later, on January 25, the internationally-recognized government overwhelmingly rejected the UN agreement, with only 15 of 104 members voting in favor.

Even if reconciliation leads to the formation of a unity government, that government will immediately face the monumental task of reuniting the country both socially and militarily. It will need to provide law and order for the Libyan people; dismantle the extensive black market networks flourishing in Libya; and secure operational control of the main drivers of the Libyan economy—primarily the oil and gas infrastructure. It will also need to defeat the extremist networks that have capitalized on the weakness of the Libyan state and used the country as a base to generate revenue and train fighters.

Continued instability in Libya will allow the so-called Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and other extremist groups to entrench their presence in the country. Conflict zones and failed states necessarily attract violent extremists—and Libya is the perfect candidate for a new safe haven for jihadist fighters. The phenomenon of foreign fighters has enhanced this threat, as young extremists are provided with an ideal destination for waging violent jihad. The cases of Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, Mali, and Syria have shown the threat that these safe havens pose to international security. Given geography, expansive territory, extensive oil reserves, and its history with violent jihadist networks, a failed state in Libya could be disastrous for North Africa and Europe, as well as the broader international community.

Conflict Background

On October 20, 2011, former Libyan leader Col. Muammar Qadhafi was dragged out of a drainage pipe in his hometown of Sirte and summarily executed by rebel forces. The images of his capture were broadcast around the world, and three days later the rebel National Transitional Council declared that Libya had been liberated from 42 years of dictatorship. In reality, however, the power vacuum left by the Qadhafi regime—and the enormous stockpiles of weapons—created a security situation that

continues to threaten the region, and which has severe implications for the broader global struggle against violent extremism.

Though Libya has the smallest population in North Africa, its people represent a diverse range of ethnic and tribal backgrounds. During its more than four decades in power, the Qadhafi regime maintained its dominance through a delicate balance of patronage, propaganda, and repression. The cruelty and extravagance of the regime belied a deep understanding of Libyan society, which allowed for expert management of the population. The absence of civil society, political parties, and national cohesion was a direct result of the paranoia of Qadhafi's rule. In the historical tradition of autocrats, Qadhafi understood that by keeping all possible opposition weak and fragmented, no one group would be capable of challenging his rule.

When Tripoli finally fell to the rebels in August of 2011, any semblance of centralized governance in Libya collapsed. Despite gaining the recognition of the international community, the fledgling rebel government in Benghazi simply did not have the influence nor the state mechanisms to exercise control over the country. With the source of patronage and repression gone, allegiances began to splinter, as each group sought to stake a claim in the new Libya. Facilitating the fracturing of the state were massive weapons stockpiles left behind by the Qadhafi regime, as well as weapons and ammunition provided to rebel forces by various foreign governments.

In an effort to legitimize the new Libyan state, the National Transitional Council transferred power to the General National Congress (GNC) in August of 2012. Oil production—the cornerstone of the Libyan economy—showed promising growth for nearly two years after the fall of the regime. By mid-2013, however, tensions between militias and the general public had come to a head, and as the country again slipped toward civil war, oil production plummeted. The combination of a power vacuum and large stores of unguarded weapons proved, unsurprisingly, to be a disaster for the stability of the new Libyan state. Convincing the various rebel militias to disarm proved impossible, as giving up weapons meant giving up power and leverage.

In October 2013, Prime Minister Ali Zeidan—who was elected by the GNC in October of 2012—was briefly kidnapped from his Tripoli hotel by the Libya Revolutionaries Operations Room. The group claimed Zeidan had violated Libyan law by allowing U.S. special forces to capture Abu Anas al-Libi—a top al-Qaeda operative indicted for his role in the 1998 bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania—on Libyan soil. After being removed from office in a vote of no-confidence in March 2014, Zeidan fled the country to avoid possible arrest. The parliament itself was subjected to several armed attacks in the subsequent months. The turmoil culminated with the armed removal of the elected government in Tripoli, which was forced to flee to Tobruk, effectively creating two rival Libyan governments.

Timeline of Major Events

February 2011	Violent protests against the regime begin in Benghazi
March 2011	The UN Security Council authorizes a no-fly zone and NATO airstrikes
August 2011	Tripoli falls to the rebels
October 2011	Col. Muammar Qadhafi is captured and killed in Sirte
August 2012	The National Transitional Council transfers power to the General National Congress
September 2012	Islamist militants—including Ansar al-Shariah—attack the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, killing American Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans
August 2013	The Petroleum Defense Guards shut down oil export terminals at es-Sidra and Ras Lanuf
October 2013	Prime Minister Ali Zeidan is briefly kidnapped by the Libya Revolutionaries Operations Room
February 2014	Protests erupt against the GNC as a result of its refusal to step down after its mandate ends
May 2014	General Khalifa Haftar and the Libyan National Army launch “Operation Dignity” against Islamists in Benghazi
July 2014	UN staff and foreign diplomats evacuate; embassies are closed
August 2014	Libya Dawn captures Tripoli; elected government flees to Tobruk
October 2014	The Islamic State declares its first Libyan Wilayah in Derna
May 2015	The Islamic State captures Sirte
June 2015	The Derna Mujahedeen Shura Council—dominated by the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade—drives the Islamic State out of Derna
November 2015	Abu Nabil al-Anbari, the leader of the Islamic State in Libya, is killed in a U.S. airstrike outside of Derna

Key Actors

Actor	Leader	Affiliation	Strongholds	Description
General National Congress (GNC)	Nouri Abusahmain	Libyan Muslim Brotherhood	Tripoli	Seized control of Tripoli in the summer of 2014 after losing parliamentary elections.
House of Representatives (HoR)	Aguila Saleh Issa	LNA	Tobruk	Recognized by the international community. Forced to relocate to Tobruk by the GNC and the Libya Dawn Militia.
Libyan National Army (LNA)	General Khalifa Haftar	HoR	Tobruk, Ajdabiya	Serves as the official military of the HoR government in Tobruk. Made up primarily of former members of the Qadhafi military.
Petroleum Defense Guards	Ibrahim al-Jadhran	HoR, LNA	Ajdabiya, Ras Lanuf	Independent militia based out of Ajdabiya. Tasked by the HoR with protecting key oil infrastructure in eastern Libya.
Libya Dawn Militia (Fajr Libya)	Coalition	GNC	Tripoli, Misrata	Supports the GNC government in Tripoli. Made up of an alliance of Islamist militias, including Libya Shield and the Libya Revolutionaries Operations Room.
Islamic State in Libya	Abu Nabil al-Anbari (deceased)	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria	Sirte	Primarily based in Sirte, but have a presence in Benghazi, Derna, and Ajdabiya. Aggressively expansionist.
Ansar al-Shariah in Libya (ASL)	Abu Khalid al-Madani	Libya Dawn, al-Qaeda	Zuwarah, Benghazi, Derna	Islamist militant group banned under Qadhafi. Has strong ties to al-Qaeda, and was largely responsible for the 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi.
Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade	Salim Derbi (deceased)	al-Qaeda	Derna	Islamist militia formed from the remnants of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). Has a strong history in eastern Libya, and drove the Islamic State from the eastern city of Derna in June 2015.
Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)	Abdelmalek Droukdel (Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud)	al-Qaeda Core (Ayman al-Zawahiri)	Ghat, Acacus Mountains	Formed from the Algerian GSPC, the group primarily operates in northern Mali and southern Algeria.
al-Mourabitoun	Mokhtar Belmokhtar	al-Qaeda	Unclear	Formed as a splinter group from AQIM, primarily active in northern Mali and southern Algeria. Leader Belmokhtar was reportedly nearly killed by an airstrike while attending a meeting with senior ASL members in Ajdabiya in June 2015.

Rival Governments

The House of Representatives

The internationally recognized government—represented by the House of Representatives (HoR)—is based in the eastern city of Tobruk, having been driven out of Tripoli by the rival Islamist Libya Dawn alliance in August of 2014. The territory controlled by the HoR and its allies is scattered, though it controls much of the eastern coastline, with several key exceptions. The city of Derna—long a hotbed of violent jihadist activity—is now largely controlled by the Mujahedeen Shura Council of Derna (MSCD), which is dominated by the al-Qaeda-linked Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade. In Benghazi, the largest eastern city, the HoR faces stiff opposition from the Benghazi Revolutionaries' Shura Council (BRSC)—which includes the al-Qaeda-linked Ansar al-Shariah in Libya (ASL)—and also faces resistance from the Islamic State in the city. The situation in Benghazi remains extremely fluid, as rival militias effectively trade control from neighborhood to neighborhood.

The most powerful element of the HoR government is the so-called Libyan National Army (LNA), which is led by Qadhafi-era General Khalifa Haftar. In May of 2014, General Haftar launched “Operation Dignity,” pledging to rid the country of “terrorists”—a definition that includes most of the Islamist militias operating in the country. The LNA itself is largely made up of Libyan army units that defected along with General Haftar during the revolution. The force has access to heavy weapons and artillery, as well as tanks, attack helicopters, and jet fighters. The LNA largely controls the northern portion of the eastern desert, though the vast remote area is notoriously difficult to patrol. Within the eastern desert, the LNA forces are primarily concentrated in the cities of Jalu and Kufra, which are key transit and smuggling hubs. Jalu is particularly critical, as it lies within large oil and gas fields, and is situated on the main highway and pipelines leading to the coast.

There are several other militia groups aligned with the HoR, one of the most powerful of which is headed by Ibrahim al-Jadhran, a native of the eastern city of Ajdabiya, which is pivotal to control of the eastern oil and gas fields. In 2012, al-Jadhran and his militia were officially assigned as the Petroleum Defense Guards in charge of the main pipelines and refineries in the eastern port cities of es-Sidra and Ras Lanuf. In mid-2013, however, al-Jadhran closed two major oil export terminals, demanding the recognized government—then based in Tripoli—give eastern Libya more autonomy, particularly as it related to oil revenues. A year later, he even

attempted to sell Libyan oil without the approval of the government, a move that was thwarted by U.S. Navy SEALs responding to pleas from Tripoli. After the HoR moved to Tobruk, al-Jadhran aligned himself with General Haftar against the Islamist government in Tripoli. However, his militia continues to control key energy infrastructure, maintaining the ability to shut down export terminals as a means of leveraging the HoR.

In the west, the HoR is also supported by the Zintan Brigades, which control a swathe of territory south of Tripoli along the Algerian border, and have forces concentrated in the cities of Zintan and Kikla. However, isolated from their allies in the east and facing pressure from Libya Dawn militias, the Zintan Brigades are gradually losing power and influence.

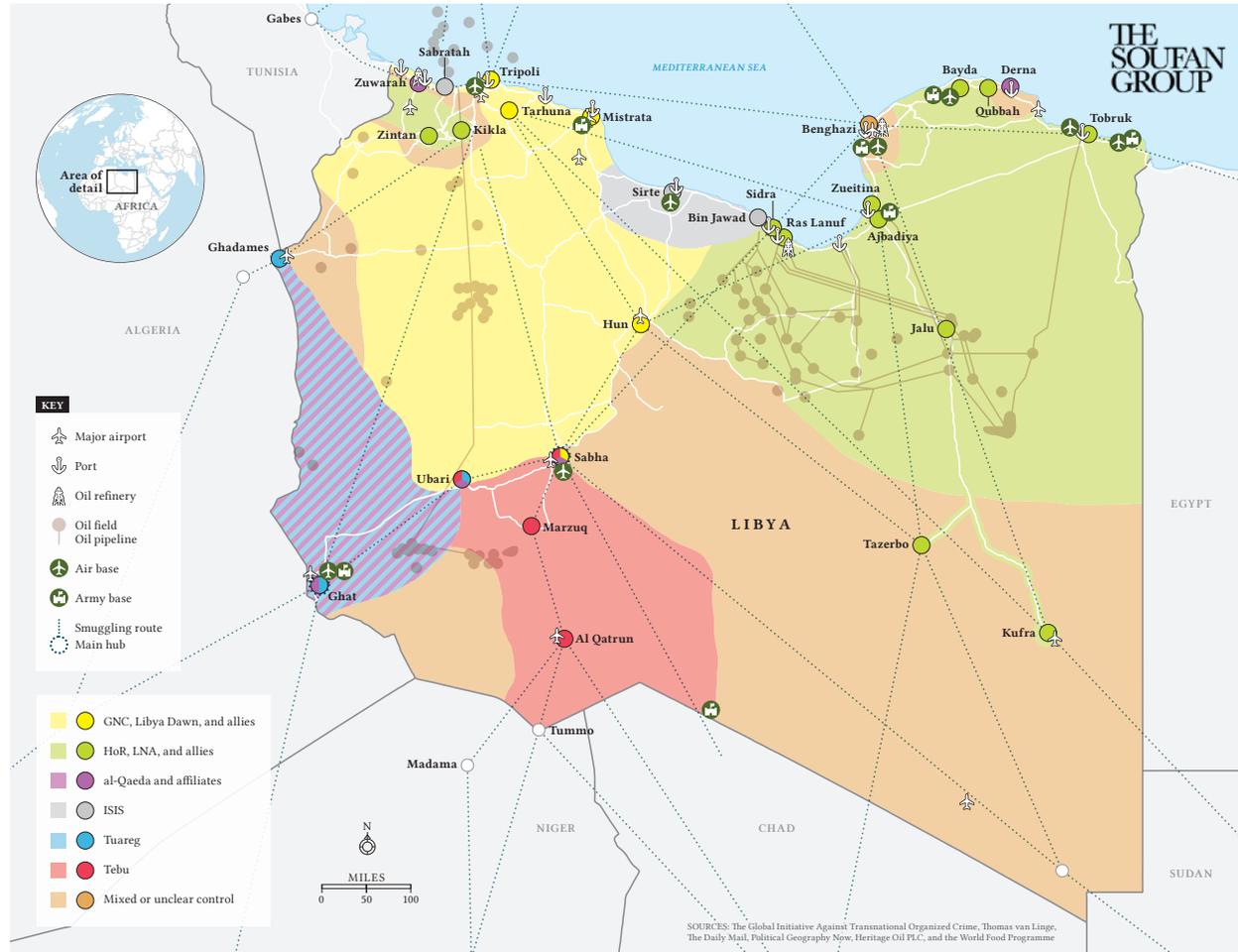
The General National Congress

Tripoli and several other key areas of western Libya are currently controlled by a loose alliance of Islamist militias known collectively as Libya Dawn. This alliance supports the General National Congress (GNC), which acts as a rival government to the internationally recognized HoR based in Tobruk. The GNC is dominated by members of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, though it also includes other Islamist factions that have been targeted by General Haftar's "Operation Dignity."

The Libya Dawn alliance represents a broad array of Islamist militias from throughout Libya, though the Libya Shield militias that make up the core of the alliance are based in the city of Misrata. The initial formation of the Libya Dawn alliance was catalyzed by opposition to the anti-Islamist pressure exerted by General Haftar and his forces. However, in the period since the seizure of Tripoli, the cohesion of Libya Dawn has begun to fray, as the alliance has been forced to maintain a delicate balance between tribal interests, political interests, and its Islamist identity.

The representatives of the GNC have had particular difficulty defining their alliances with other Islamist groups, especially the al-Qaeda-linked ASL. These more radical groups do not appeal to the more politically minded Islamists in the alliance, and also affect the international reputation of the GNC. However, relationships with these groups—especially ASL—are well developed, and remain important as the Libya Dawn militia faces continued pressure from HoR-aligned militias, especially over control of vital energy infrastructure. The Libya Dawn alliance is also facing

increasing pressure from the Islamic State in Libya, which has drawn some of the more extremist Islamist elements away from the coalition. The Islamic State is aggressively working to expand in Libya, and is being aided by ranks of foreign fighters, many of whom have traveled from neighboring Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt.



Extremist Groups

The fracturing of the Libyan state, and the accompanying levels of violence, has allowed violent extremist groups to flourish. Currently, both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda—or its affiliates—control territory within the country, and both are drawing revenue from the expansive illicit economy. The groups are using Libya as a base for training fighters, and as a staging ground to launch attacks against neighboring nations. Libya has a violent jihadist tradition dating back to the Soviet Afghan War, though the repressive and authoritarian Qadhafi government was largely able to keep militant jihadist activities in check. With the collapse of the regime, the long-suppressed militant Islamist factions sought to fill the resulting vacuum.

The Islamic State

The formation of the Islamic State branch in Libya was a deliberate and strategic move by the group's leadership in Syria, meant to leverage the chaos in the country to its advantage. In the spring of 2014, members of the Battar Brigade—a group of Libyans who had been fighting in Syria—returned to their homeland and formed Majlis Shura Shabaab al-Islam (MSSI) in the eastern city of Derna. Simultaneously, the Islamic State leadership in Syria sent senior militants—including Iraqi national Abu Nabil al-Anbari, a veteran al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) operative and former Ba'athist official—to Libya to establish a new *Wilayah* (governorate).¹ That goal was realized on October 3, 2014, when the territory held by MSSI was officially declared to be “Wilayet Derna” of the Islamic State.²

However, the group faced immediate resistance from the Mujahedeen Shura Council of Derna—dominated by the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade (Abu Salim), an Islamist militia formed by members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), which has a long history in the city.³ Abu Salim, and other remnants of the LIFG—which are both generally more closely allied with al-Qaeda—resented the aggression of the foreigner-led Islamic State. After months of clashes, Abu Salim managed to push the Islamic State out of Derna in June 2015, assisted by the support of the local population, many of whom had also rejected the foreigner-led Islamic State in favor of the native Abu Salim. Despite this setback, the Islamic State maintains a presence in the areas surrounding Derna, as evidenced by the November 13, 2015 death of al-Anbari in a U.S. airstrike just outside of the city. The group also maintains a presence in and around the eastern city of Benghazi.

At the time of its defeat in Derna, the Islamic State had already made inroads in the central coastal city of Sirte—Qadhafi's hometown, and the heartland of his Qhadhafa tribe. The group was able to progress toward Sirte with the help of defectors from ASL—including Hassan al-Karamy, a former senior ASL figure who is now the reported spiritual leader of the Islamic State in Libya—as well as support from

¹ Ryan, Missy and Hassan Morajea, “In Libya, the Islamic State's Black Banner Rises by the Mediterranean,” *Washington Post*, October 8, 2015. Accessed December 16, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-libya-the-islamic-states-black-banner-rises-by-the-mediterranean/2015/10/08/15f3de1a-56fc-11e5-8bb1-b488d231bba2_story.html

² Zelin, Aaron Y., “The Islamic State's First Colony in Libya,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 10, 2014. Accessed December 16, 2015. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-first-colony-in-libya>

³ “Al-Qaida-Linked Militants Attack IS Affiliate in Libya,” *Associated Press*, June 10, 2015. Accessed December 16, 2015. <https://news.yahoo.com/al-qaida-militants-clash-libya-leader-killed-090144601.html>

disaffected members of the Qhadhafa tribe.⁴ By late May 2015, the Islamic State had seized the city's airport, and took control of a key power plant west of the city the following week. Sirte proved to be more susceptible to the influence of the Islamic State due to the combination of disgruntled Qadhafi loyalists, ASL defectors, and the lack of any significant opposition force. When the group did face resistance from the local Ferjan tribe, the Islamic State killed 57 of its members, decapitating and crucifying twelve as a warning to other potential challengers.⁵

Since losing Derna, the Islamic State has declared the formation of three Wilayat: Tarablus, along the western coast; Barqah in the east; and Fezzan in the southwest. It has worked to establish Sirte as its Libyan capital, in the model of Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq. The black flag of the group adorns buildings across the city, while *dawa* (proselytizing) billboards promote piety in line with its extremist ideology. Religious police patrol the city in pickup trucks, enforcing strict interpretations of religious law. *Shariah* courts set up by the group impose fringe interpretations of *hudud*—which includes apostasy, theft, adultery, and consumption of intoxicants. Punishments range from lashes, to amputation, to execution.⁶

The group has also used its base in Sirte to launch a propaganda campaign reminiscent of its parent group in Syria. It is likely that at least some senior Islamic State members sent to Libya in 2014—and others since—include media specialists and propagandists, and the Islamic State in Libya openly receives editing and production assistance from the primary al-Hayat media center in Raqqa.⁷ The Islamic State in Libya has similarly embraced the publicized brutality of its parent organization, and has released several videos of the mass decapitation of Egyptian, Ethiopian, and Eritrean Christians.

In the model of its black market networks in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State in Libya has worked to profit from the lucrative smuggling networks flowing through the country. Rather than participate in the smuggling directly, the Islamic State generally taxes smugglers, both on the Mediterranean coast and along the remote transit routes

⁴ Zelin, "The Islamic State's First Colony in Libya."

⁵ Paton, Callum, "ISIS in Libya: 12 Beheaded and Crucified by Islamic State in City of Sirte," *International Business Times*, August 17, 2015. Accessed December 16, 2015. <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-libya-twelve-beheaded-crucified-by-islamic-state-city-sirte-1515774>

⁶ Zelin, Aaron Y. "The Islamic State's Burgeoning Capital in Sirte, Libya," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 6, 2015. Accessed December 16, 2015. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-burgeoning-capital-in-sirte-libya>

⁷ Ryan and Morajea, "In Libya, the Islamic State's Black Banner Rises by the Mediterranean."

through the southern desert.⁸ There are even some reports that Islamic State forces in Syria are deliberately attacking refugee camps in southern Syria, attempting to drive more refugees to Libya—generally by way of Khartoum—in order to increase profits from human smuggling.⁹

Increasingly, the Islamic State has been directing its activities toward Libya's vast oil and gas infrastructure, particularly in the Western desert and along the coast east of Sirte. It has attacked several oil installations controlled by rival militias, and recent reports suggest that the group is actively seeking to profit from oil and gas smuggling as it does in Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State sent a strong signal of its intentions when its fighters seized the ancient Phoenician port of Sabratah—west of Tripoli—which happens to be just 10 miles east of a key oil and gas refinery at Mellitah. The group also recently attacked the oil-exporting coastal towns of es-Sidra and Ras Lanuf, which are defended by al-Jadhran's Petroleum Defense Guards. Building on the model of the governance mechanisms developed by the group in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic state also draws profits from a taxation system in Sirte and other areas under its control.

Al-Qaeda

The protracted history of Islamist militancy in Libya has long had close ties to al-Qaeda. Eastern Libya was home to the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), formed by Libyan veterans of the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan. The LIFG reportedly tried to kill Colonel Qadhafi three times, leading to brutal regime repression of the group and its supporters. Many LIFG members fled Libya for Sudan, Afghanistan, and later Iraq, where they interacted closely with al-Qaeda. Members of the LIFG, including the infamous Abu Yahya al-Libi, became senior al-Qaeda officials, and Ayman al-Zawahiri embraced a pledge of allegiance from the group in a 2007 audio message.¹⁰ The Libyan towns of Derna and Benghazi remain hotbeds of support for al-Qaeda and its affiliates, and serve as important hubs for the group's activities in North Africa.

⁸ Crowcroft, Orlando. "ISIS: People Trafficking, Smuggling and Punitive Taxes Boost Islamic State Economy," *International Business Times*, June 16, 2015. Accessed December 16, 2015. <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-people-trafficking-smuggling-punitive-taxes-boost-islamic-state-economy-1506473>

⁹ Walt, Vivienne, "ISIS Makes a Fortune From Smuggling Migrants Says Report," *TIME*, May 13, 2015. Accessed December 16, 2015. <http://time.com/3857121/isis-smuggling/>

¹⁰ Roggio, Bill, "Libyan Islamic Fighting Group Joins al-Qaeda," *The Long War Journal*, November 3, 2007. Accessed January 7, 2016. http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/11/libyan_islamic_fight.php

Since the fall of the Qadhafi regime, al-Qaeda, and particularly its North African branch al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), has taken advantage of the power vacuum to establish an economic and strategic base in Libya. Since 2007, AQIM—formed from the Algerian *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GSPC)—has operated in the Sahara and Sahel regions, primarily in the deserts of southern Algeria and northern Mali. From remote desert camps, AQIM became closely tied to the trans-Saharan smuggling trade, providing protection for criminal networks moving drugs, weapons, migrants, and contraband across the vast desert.

Through its smuggling operations, AQIM began to build alliances with the nomadic Tuareg tribes that often served as guides for smuggling gangs. The Tuareg—whose populations are primarily spread through the deserts of Mali, Niger, Algeria, and Libya—have a long history of disenfranchisement, and have led rebellions in several countries in pursuit of self-determination. Al-Qaeda was able to exploit these frustrations to build support within some Tuareg communities, and draw young Tuareg men to take up arms in the name of al-Qaeda. Some members of AQIM even married into the Tuareg tribal structure, cementing these relationships through familial ties.

The chaos in Libya has allowed al-Qaeda to better connect its nodes in Benghazi and Derna with the resources and manpower of AQIM. Taking advantage of the collapse of the Libyan military, AQIM fighters—and fighters from the AQIM splinter group al-Mourabitoun—have moved into the rugged Acacus Mountains on the southwestern border with Algeria, and have a strong presence in the border town of Ghat, which is traditionally Tuareg. Fighters from AQIM are able to move relatively unhindered across the southern Libyan desert, ensuring continual access to the smuggling routes leading north to the coast. Currently, al-Qaeda and its affiliates also have a strong presence in the western port city of Zuwarah, where ASL reportedly controls the nearby Mellitah refinery—which hosts an oil pipeline to Italy—and has been allowed by the GNC government in Tripoli to maintain control of any export profits. Zuwarah is also a major hub for migrant smuggling, which earns enormous profits for the group. Utilizing its relationships with the Tuareg, al-Qaeda has developed extensive smuggling networks across the Sahara and the Sahel, with its increased presence in Libya allowing for access to ports, weapons, and new markets for goods smuggled from West Africa.

Threat Trends

Undoubtedly, the situation in Libya presents a long-term destabilizing threat to the entire North African region. The collapse of law and order, when combined with the

lasting effects of the dictatorship of Colonel Qadhafi, has created an environment in which centralized control of the country is extremely difficult, if not impossible. In the current context, the various groups operating in Libya have little incentive to surrender gains they have achieved since the fall of the government; and for groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, there is no incentive whatsoever.

Continued instability in Libya is likely to have several lasting effects. First, it will allow the Islamic State in Libya to solidify its territorial holdings in Sirte and the surrounding areas. Outside of the core territory in Iraq and Syria, Libya represents the most valuable strategic position for the group, as it provides access to ports, large stores of weapons, and lucrative smuggling routes. The relative lawlessness of Libya, and its long, porous borders, allows the group to move fighters—particularly those from Tunisia, the Islamic State’s most populous foreign fighter contingent—in and out of the territory. Some Islamic State recruitment materials have even begun instructing aspiring foreign fighters to travel to Libya, rather than to the group’s besieged core positions in Iraq and Syria. As the group faces increasing military pressure on its strongholds in Raqqa and Mosul, this trend is likely to increase.

In sending a senior foreign operative—al-Anbari—to run the group in Libya, the Islamic State leadership signaled the importance of its Libyan territory. Outside of Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State group in Libya is one of the few affiliates with a direct command and control relationship with the core leadership in Raqqa and Mosul. In order to solidify and expand its influence in the country, the group will continue importing foreign fighters and attracting defectors from other extremist Islamist elements within the country. As the group becomes more entrenched, it will also be better able to extort taxes from those under its control, and to exploit the thriving black market economy for its own economic gain.

Second, the lawless environment in Libya has allowed al-Qaeda to increase its foothold in the country. As with al-Nusra in Syria, al-Qaeda is exerting its influence through affiliated groups such as ASL—one of the groups that assaulted the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, resulting in the death of Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans. Al-Qaeda has also integrated itself into the broader GNC alliance, rather than adopting the trademark antagonism and aggression of its Islamic State rival. This strategy of integration and proxy utilization makes al-Qaeda’s presence less observable to the outside, which is ultimately beneficial to the group. The ties with the GNC and Libya Dawn will also allow ASL, and by extension, al-Qaeda, to ensure a stake in any future unity government.

In addition, the increased freedom of movement in the south of the country, especially along the western borders with Algeria and Niger, has provided AQIM's senior leadership with new safe havens. Key figures such as Mokhtar Belmokhtar¹¹—former military commander of AQIM and current leader of the AQIM splinter group al-Mourabitoun—have generally operated out of the deserts of northern Mali and southern Algeria. Pressure from Algerian, French, and African Union troops remains a constant threat in those areas, but now Libya offers a lawless fallback position for commanders and fighters should they need it. As seen in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda is most dangerous when it has a stable base from which to operate.

Third, the current instability in Libya presents a serious security threat for the region as a whole. For those states bordering Libya, the proliferation of well-armed criminal and extremists groups is of particular concern. The threat is especially acute for Tunisia, which has already experienced several terror attacks perpetrated by individuals trained by extremist groups within Libya. According to Tunisian authorities, the individuals who attacked the Bardo museum and a beach resort in Sousse trained together at an Islamic State training camp near the western Libyan city of Sabratah.¹² Tunisia has also provided the most foreign fighters to regional battlefields—approximately 6,000—and Libya presents a more convenient destination for aspiring Tunisian jihadist fighters than Syria or Iraq. Algeria and Egypt are both combating Islamist insurgencies within their borders, and Libya also provides a safe haven for these groups to orchestrate attacks on both countries.

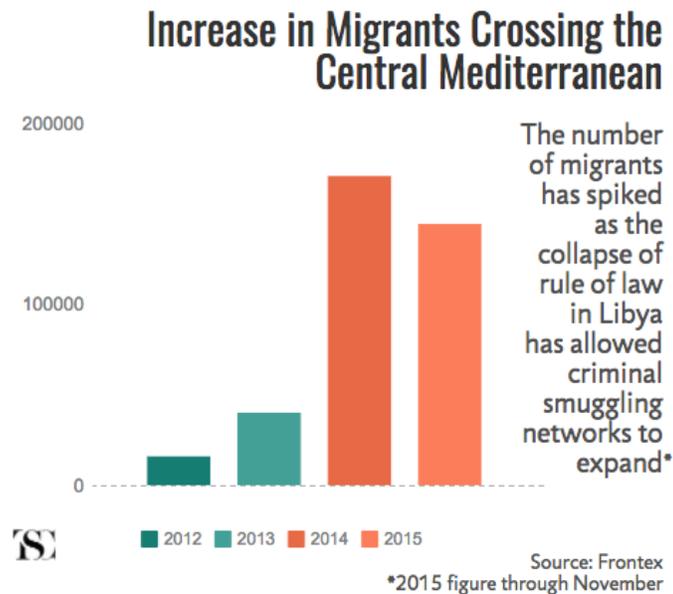
Libya's southern neighbors will also feel the impact of continued instability in the country. Mali has been battling an Islamist insurgency since 2012, and at one point the government lost control of the entirety of the northern half of the country. While French and African Union intervention has largely pushed the insurgents back, the influx of arms from Libya, and the safe haven the country provides, will allow these groups to remain a threat to Malian security. Niger and Chad have also struggled to control their vast northern territories, and the expansion of black market networks in Libya will only make that task more difficult. The threat posed by the security situation in Libya extends even as far as Eritrea and Ethiopia, where networks of

¹¹ The Libyan government claimed that Belmokhtar was killed in a June 15, 2015 U.S. airstrike, but a Twitter account linked to AQIM issued a statement several days later denying that claim.

¹² Stephen, Chris, "Tunisia Gunman Trained in Libya at Same Time as Bardo Museum Attackers," *The Guardian*, June 30, 2015. Accessed January 7, 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/30/tunisia-beach-attack-seifeddine-rezgui-libya-bardo-museum-attackers>

human traffickers linked to Libya are preying on refugees, and extorting money from their families.

Finally, the security environment in Libya presents serious challenges for Europe. Though the flow of migrants in the Eastern Mediterranean has increased in the past year, tens of thousands of migrants continue to utilize the Central Mediterranean Route from North Africa to Italy—more than 144,000 in 2015, the vast majority of whom traveled from Libya.¹³ The crossing from Libya is long and dangerous, and boats are often overcrowded and poorly maintained. While Central Mediterranean migrants represented only 16.3% of the total of those crossing the Mediterranean in 2015,¹⁴ they represented 78.2% of the recorded deaths¹⁵—and that number is likely much higher. While the winter months will see a drop in the number of crossings, continued conflict, drought, and economic stagnation will likely cause these numbers to spike again in the spring and summer months of 2016. European nations are struggling to prevent these tragedies at sea, a task that has been complicated by the absence of effective law enforcement on the Libyan side.



¹³ Frontex, “Migratory Routes Map.” Accessed January 15, 2016. <http://frontex.europa.eu/trends-and-routes/migratory-routes-map/> (figures through November 2015).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ IOM, “Missing Migrants Project: Mediterranean Update—December 18, 2015.” Accessed January 15, 2016. https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/infographic/image/Mediterranean_Update_18_December_Page_1.jpg

Conclusion

The current security situation in Libya presents a number of serious hurdles to stability. While there have been some moves toward national reconciliation—primarily the December 17, 2015 agreement between representatives from the rival governments in Tobruk and Tripoli, and the subsequent nomination of a cabinet on January 19, 2016—political tensions in Libya have created serious obstacles. Immediately following the December 17 agreement, major factions within both rival governments rejected the deal, saying it did not represent their positions. The proposed cabinet nominees were not unanimously approved by the Unity Presidential Council, and there is widespread suspicion that the nominations were made simply to meet the 40-day deadline set by the December 17 agreement. The resounding rejection of the agreement by the HoR on January 25, 2016 offered conclusive evidence that, despite high international hopes, the rival parties in Libya simply do not have the incentive to compromise on power-sharing.

Interested regional powers have also been working behind the scenes to support their favored parties in Libya and, as in Syria, they are averse to any deals that threaten the power positions of their patrons. Particularly for those supporting the HoR, any reconciliation with the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated GNC is viewed as unacceptable. Mirroring that position is General Khalifa Haftar—the commander of the largest fighting force in Libya—who refuses to acknowledge any unity government that contains Islamist elements that he has labelled as terrorists.

There are also concerns of possible legal challenges over the constitutionality of any proposed unity government, and these concerns are only heightened by questions regarding the ability of the Libyan judiciary—and especially the Supreme Court—to operate free from the threat of armed intimidation by militias. Even if a unity government is formed, there is no guarantee that it can even ensure its physical security in Tripoli, the proposed seat of the government. The last united central government in Tripoli was physically attacked multiple times, saw its prime minister kidnapped, and was eventually driven out of the city due to disagreements over election results. Even the Unity Presidential Council is based in Tunisia because of the security situation within Libya.

International military intervention could serve to stabilize the security situation in Libya, and a coalition including the United States, Britain, France, Italy—among others—has reportedly begun to lay the groundwork for such an intervention.

However, Western military officials have made it clear that no action will be taken until a legitimate unity government requests foreign assistance. The rejection of the UN-brokered agreement effectively puts the possibility of foreign military intervention on hold, barring a unilateral decision from the international coalition. The continued power struggle in Libya likely means that any Western military coalition will have difficulty identifying effective and reliable partners in the country, and raises real concerns that Western military intervention could exacerbate the internal conflict.

There is also a concern that any military intervention will be primarily focused on eliminating the threat from the Islamic State in Libya, while neglecting the broader political and social context. Without genuine reconciliation among the various factions within Libya, any gains made by an international military coalition would be merely temporary. In addition, while the Islamic State certainly poses a grave threat to Libyan stability, its removal will not automatically secure the country, or its neighbors. Without international focus on disarmament and political reconciliation, there is unlikely to be sustainable stability in Libya.

Contributors

Richard Barrett

Senior Fellow

Richard Barrett, Senior Vice President, is a former British diplomat and intelligence officer who from March 2004 to January 2013 headed the United Nations Monitoring Team concerning Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

Jack Berger

Research Analyst

Jack Berger, Research Analyst, focuses on security and countering violent extremism at The Soufan Center.

Lila Ghosh

Chief of Staff

Lila Ghosh is the Chief of Staff at The Soufan Center, focusing on communications, research, and strategy.

Daniel Schoenfeld

Junior Research Analyst

Daniel Schoenfeld is a Research Analyst Intern at The Soufan Center, focusing on terrorism and international security.

Mohamed el-Shawesh

Junior Media Analyst

Mohamed El Shawesh is a Research and Media Intern at The Soufan Center, focusing on Middle Eastern and North African media.

Patrick M. Skinner

Director of Special Projects

Patrick M. Skinner, Director of Special Projects, is a former CIA Case Officer, specializing in counterterrorism issues.

Ali Soufan

Founder

Ali Soufan, Founder, is a former FBI Supervisory Special Agent who investigated and supervised highly sensitive and complex international terrorism cases.

The Soufan Center

The Soufan Center is a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving as a resource and forum for research, analysis, and strategic dialogue related to global security issues and emergent threats. We provide the necessary knowledge and tools to a variety of stakeholders so that communities may successfully confront an evolving threat landscape and create contextualized, actionable policy solutions.

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