Report

The Islamic State (IS) in Libya:

Expansion by Political Crisis

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The Islamic State's (IS) expansion in Libya will depend on ability of parties to the conflict to come to a political solution [Reuters-Archive]

Abstract

Libya is the Islamic State's third largest stronghold after Syria and Iraq. Their presence there is a major pillar of their transnational "Caliphate" doctrine, the existence and legitimacy of which cannot possibly be dependent only on its acceptance in the Levant. The group's choice to expand throughout the Libyan coastal regions is part of their strategy to take hold of regions where human trafficking networks are active, thus securing themselves an ever-fresh, steady supply of transborder recruits. Given the group's propensity to take control of oil production facilities, it is expected they will continue expanding along the coastline to capture new oil supplies, their preferred source of funding.

The Islamic State (IS or Daesh) has transcended al-Qaeda's modus operandi. The IS media machine highlights daily triumphs, and short-term goals and achievements, in an effort to lure gullible young people to join them and experience these immediate, tangible victories. By contrast, al-Qaeda is devoted to the idea of waging a long-term war against the West, focusing on operations that target western interests everywhere: a long-term strategy that requires patience, longevity and stamina.

While each of the warring factions in Libya attempted to use the presence of IS in the country to their own advantage, they completely lost sight of the group's ability to expand and gain control of the country, using the irreconcilable hostilities between the country's two largest military and political factions to their own advantage.

Introduction

Libya is the Islamic State's (IS or Daesh) third largest bastion after Syria and Iraq. Their actual head count in the country notwithstanding, their presence there is a major contributor to the transnational "Caliphate" doctrine, the very existence and legitimacy

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of which cannot possibly be dependent only upon its acceptance in the Levant. In Libya, the group found an ideal haven in which to work and expand: a context of rampant instability and a complete absence of statehood, with two national groups fighting each other for the claim of legitimacy and, by extension, more power and influence.

While Libya's sectarian homogeneity poses an obstacle for the expansion of the Islamic State, which has proven adept at taking advantage of sectarian rifts and societal discord to establish itself in Iraq and Syria, its quest in Libya has been made easier by continued failures of the state, the ongoing political and security vacuum and the inability of warring factions to reach a political solution to the crisis. Daesh began its operations not too long ago in Derna on the Mediterranean coast, a stronghold for jihadist and takfiri thought. Today, the group is quickly expanding towards Sirte and has their sights set on other strategic points as they continue to fight their way across the Libyan coastal regions.

From emergence to expansion

One of the major milestones of the Islamic State's "official" presence in Libya came immediately after the Islamic Youth Shura Council, a militant group that had been in control of Derna, declared allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of IS in Iraq and Syria, and to Ansar al-Sharia in Derna, in October 2014.[1]

The protracted crisis in Syria and the failure to topple Bashar al-Assad drew fighters from all over the Maghreb to Libya, which became their gateway into neighbouring Arab countries and Africa at large. The group reformulated its strategy accordingly, and as more and more fighters from the Maghreb started to return from Syria, a debate began on how to repurpose those fighters in their own homelands. This was in 2013 – 2014, and it was around the time the group started to become active in Libya. Those fighters, who had formed their own militias in Syria, were part of groups such as the al-Bitar Brigades, one of the most vicious groups that fought with IS against the Syrian rebels. A number of that group's fighters returned to Libya to form the Islamic Youth Shura Council. An IS delegation, including Yemeni Abu al-Baraa el-Azdi and Saudi Habib Al-Jazrawi, visited the Islamic Youth Shura Council in Derna and talked them into pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Soon afterwards, the council declared eastern Libya an IS province and called it the Barqa (Cyrenaica) province.[2]

Strategically, the purpose of the group's activity in Libya is not only to expand internally. Their basic strategy remains to build a base for IS expansion in the African north, and reach out to other extremist groups that they can bring into their fold in the Sahara and North Africa coastal regions. The group's choice to expand throughout the highlands on the Libyan coastline, starting from Derna all the way to Sirte, including the attacks on

Misrata, which is also on the sea, was not accidental. This decision forms part of the group's overall strategy to take hold of areas where human trafficking is highly active, so as to ensure themselves an ever-fresh, steady supply of foreign recruits.

Given the group's propensity to attack and seek control of oil production facilities, it can be safely anticipated that they will continue sweeping across the coastline to gain control of as much of Libya's oil as they can. Oil has been their preferred source of funding in Syria and in Iraq, and it is the same in Libya, where Sirte is one of the major points of interest in the "oil crescent" region.

Despite a few recent victories, it would be difficult for the Islamic State to approach Tripoli, knowing full well that if they did, they would provoke direct European intervention, especially by Italy. Undoubtedly, such an attempt would also mean that the IS threat would grow exponentially in nearby Tunisia.

Moreover, that scenario, should they attempt it, would require IS to have the capability to defeat the Libya Dawn forces. As they stand now, the group is caught in the middle between General Khalifa Haftar's forces to the east and Libya Dawn forces to the west and south. Even in Derna, the group is having a difficult time battling fighters of the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council.

The importance of controlling the coastline has not been lost on the Islamic State, but then again, neither has it been lost on the Europeans, who realise that the group having control in Libya is a serious threat to their interests there, especially with regard to illegal immigration. IS leader Abu Irhayyim al-Libi even said as much: "Libya has a long coastline facing southern Europe, making it easy for us to target the crusading countries, even if only with a makeshift ship".[3]

Another milestone in the short history of Daesh is its capture of the coastal city of Sirte in late May, which played out very much like what happened in Iraq. IS managed to run Battalion 166, tasked by the General National Congress to keep IS out of Sirte, out of the city, with the battalion subsequently losing its positions within the city and in the al-Ghardabiya base, where the city's international airport is located, just twenty kilometres from downtown Sirte.

In Sirte, a former stronghold of Muammar Gaddafi loyalists, the Islamic State found a niche. The closest explanation of how the group managed to march into the city is that Islamic militant groups within the city – some of which had been Gaddafi loyalists – merely changed brands, adopting that of IS. Nevertheless, the Islamic State a highly pragmatic group, capable of beguiling and ensnaring recruits from various, diverse backgrounds and using them with remarkable efficiency.

By the same token, merely changing brands to that of the Islamic State is exactly what Ansar al-Sharia's fighters did. Miftah Marzouq, the president of the Sirte elders and Shura council, put it this way, "The group keen on calling themselves the Islamic State in Sirte are the very ones that used to be Ansar al-Sharia in the city. Most of them are young men from the city, whose families we know by name".(4)

Sirte is situated at the heart of the country's major oil facilities. As such, should the group be able to keep the city and secure their presence there, they would have a new source of funding at their disposal, enabling them to pay their fighters through illegal oil trading.

There is quite a bit of speculation on why Battalion 166 pulled out of the city. The lack of funds to pay soldiers' salaries has often been cited as a possible reason.(5) The group advanced towards and took over the town of Harawa (seventy kilometres east of Sirte), this time by mutual accord with tribes in the area. Meetings between IS leaders and Libyan tribal elders in the vicinity of Nawfaliah (127 kilometres east of Sirte) led to an agreement that IS fighters would be allowed to enter Harawa unopposed.

As for the funding consistently sought by the Islamic State, the two sides are set to meet at a later date to agree upon a ransom that the residents of Harawa would pay to the group, as blood money in exchange for the latter's casualties during earlier hostilities in the town.(6)

Beyond al-Qaeda's rationale: more attainable goals attract the young and gullible

The Islamic State differs from al-Qaeda in that it has a more definite agenda and a clear-cut mode of operation: fight locally, then build institutions – no matter how feeble and fragile – to establish rule. This is in contrast to al-Qaeda's more haphazard model, in which attacks must be carried out abroad in order to sell the al-Qaeda brand locally.(7)

The Islamic State took a different approach than that of al-Qaeda. Their media machine highlights daily victories and short-term, attainable objectives – no matter how small – in order to persuade potential recruits to join the group, which heavily markets their message of short-term successes that are tangible and immediately felt by their fighters. By contrast, al-Qaeda is given to the idea of waging a long-term war against the West, focusing on operations that target Western interests everywhere – a long-term strategy that requires patience, longevity and stamina.

The Islamic State habitually divides countries in which they have a militant presence into "wilayat", or "provinces", the latest named Barqa, Tripoli and Fezzan. Given the political

and military context, these are not provinces in the true sense of the word, as much as they are part of the group's propaganda machine's attempt to use geography and history to create a political and military status quo. In the period from late 2014 to early 2015, the group built their vision for how Libya should be divided based on the country's historical division made up of three provinces: Cyrenaica (modern-day Barqa), which currently encompasses the entire eastern part of the country, Tripoli in the middle and west, and Fezzan in the south.

Wherever they expand, the Islamic State is always eager to reshape life according to their own laws and ideology, and disseminate certain practices: "Hisba" – the enforcement of public morals – entails the burning of cigarette packs, tearing down statues and shrines, and calling upon Muslims in public areas to pledge their allegiance to the group in local mosques, as well as carrying out Islamic Da'awa ("inviting" to Islam) activities, offering aid to the poor, and giving out candy and presents to children, as Daesh did in Benghazi. Additionally, IS uses violence, as in Barqa, where they executed Tunisian journalists.(8)

The Islamic State has the following main, strategic objectives for its expansion:
- Eradicate the borders among Libya, Egypt and Tunisia, as IS leader Abu Mouath al-Barqawi stated in an essay titled "Join the Realm of the Caliphate".(9)
- Turn Libya into a strategic gateway for the Islamic State. In the words of Abu Irhayyim al-Libi: "There are some who don't realise the [strategic] importance of Libya, which encompasses sea, desert and mountains, and provides access to Egypt, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Algeria and Tunisia".(10)

Internally, Misrata is a primary strategic target for the group's expansion going forward, the fall of which would give them control over the entire Libyan coast. In late May 2015, IS militants targeted the city with an attack on a nearby checkpoint that left six dead.(11) According to online accounts by IS supporters, their militants attacked the Buqrain entrance in the city's east on 7 June 2015, killing three locals.(12)

On the other hand, Misrata is also vital to thwarting the expansion of, and defeating, the Islamic State. Even though well-trained, well-armed forces thwarted the group's ambitions there, that didn't stop Daesh from mounting a two-pronged propaganda campaign: one ideological and the other political. Abu Mouath al-Barqawi called upon the youth of Misrata to sacrifice themselves for God, and not for the sake of democracy by supporting the Libya Dawn forces. He also made his position clear on the governments in Tripoli and Tobruk in a message titled, "Message to the people and youth of Misrata", in which he said, "To the parliament in Tripoli and Libya Dawn, I say be aware that just as the Islamic State took al-Bayda and Tobruk with God's grace, it can take Misrata and Tripoli. You have seen some of our deeds in Tripoli".(13)

The bombing of the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli in late January 2015 indicates the presence of scattered sleeper cells and splinter groups that form the Islamic State's frontline all the way to Tripoli. Their task is to achieve one, clear-cut tactical objective: to create chaos. This is the same mode of operation the Islamic State uses in Iraq, such as bombings in Baghdad or other bombings immediately preceding an impending attack. The Corinthia bombing was dubbed "the Abu Anas al-Libi Incursion", in response to the latter's death in a US prison. The group later claimed responsibility for the bombing and published pictures of the perpetrators.

Of course, the Corinthia bombing was not without political and military objectives. Omar al-Hassi, then the National Salvation Government's prime minister, had been at the hotel around the time of the attack. Abu Anas al-Libi was a well-known leader in al-Qa'ida but not an IS leader. The group also claimed responsibility for the bombing that targeted the Iranian embassy in Tripoli in February 2015.[14]

Indicators show that the group have already spread into the so-called Fezzan province. Al-Furqan Foundation for Media Production, the group's media arm, broadcast a video showing the execution by shooting of so-called "subjects of the cross of the belligerent Ethiopian church" in April 2015.[15]

Infighting helps IS spread

In one way or another, every one of the warring parties in Libya attempted to use the presence of the Islamic State to their advantage. They somehow forgot that the terrorist group could expand and use the infighting between the two largest political and military groups in the country to their advantage.

At the beginning, the Libya Dawn forces, and the National Congress along with them, believed that the existence of the Islamic State and their fight against General Khalifa Haftar's forces were advantageous to them, so they initially did not attempt to take them on. However, developments on the ground –especially the defeat of Battalion 166, which the National Congress had assigned to defend Sirte against IS – and the group's move to secure the city with a gigantic show of force, complete with fighters and vehicles and anti-aircraft weapons, followed by an announcement of their future goals, have forced the Libya Dawn forces to rethink their military options.

Operation Dignity, on the other hand, painted the group as a gang of terrorists, in an attempt to gain international support for fighting IS. Daesh's targeting of Misrata will weaken Libya Dawn to the advantage of Operation Dignity. The latter is betting on the notion that the more convinced the international community is that the Islamic State's

presence in the country is a threat to them, the more they are likely to intervene, even though previous attempts at international air intervention in Iraq and Syria have not been as effective on the ground as hoped. The group has not only sprung back into action as soon as the air strikes stopped, but has also found new ground to take as things became more chaotic following each wave of air strikes.

The National Congress and Libya Dawn know full well that Operation Dignity is using terrorism and fighting IS as trump cards to their advantage. When IS claimed responsibility for the Corinthia Hotel bombing, then-prime minister Omar al-Hassi was quick to deny that IS had anything to do with the attack. The National Salvation Government claimed that the attack was an attempt on Hassi's life, accusing Haftar's loyalists and their foreign supporters, while the disbanded Libyan parliament in Tobruk quickly demanded that Libya be included in the global war on terrorism, reiterating that the Islamic State were behind the bombing at the hotel.[16]

Recruiting local fighters

In addition to the moderate amount of funds that the Islamic State in Libya obtains from Syria, they receive a number of military trainers from there, too, according to Pentagon officials.[17] Before they revert to their preferred mode of operation – facilitating the arrival of foreign fighters into Libya and getting them involved in military operations – they work on recruiting fighters from other militias. Some reports say that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had sent delegates to Libya to explore possible alliances with local groups.[18]

As time passed, the Islamic State managed to usurp Ansar al-Sharia. Abu Abdullah al-Libi, the religious leader and supreme judge of the so-called Islamic Court of Ansar al-Sharia, pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the caliph, and the news spread through Twitter and other social media. The Libya TV channel said that Libi had announced the pledge in an audio recording published on jihadist websites.[19]

The same trend can be seen in Barqawi's infamous message to the people of Misrata, with which he attempted to lure the city's young men to join the group after making his position clear on all sides of the Libyan crisis. These are some of the key excerpts from his message, joined together: "I would like to clarify some issues to Libyans in general, and to the people of Misrata in particular…(To the city's young men) If you are keen on making sacrifices for Libya, let your sacrifice be in the name of God, not in the name of the National Congress that rules by democracy…Does the Islamic State's expansion into a Muslim country automatically render its mujahideen agents of the tyrannical regime that had just been toppled? The Islamic State believes in the excommunication of the tyrant Gaddafi, his loyalists, his soldiers and their supporters, as well as [Ahmed] Gaddaf al-Dam and his supporters…The Islamic State believes in the excommunication of the

Tobruk parliament, its members, and the security and military forces working under it. [IS] also believes in the excommunication of the tyrant [general Khalifa] Haftar, his army, his supporters and his tribal loyalists, and everyone who sided with him against the mujahideen and Muslims, and all those who fought in the name of democracy, secularism and liberalism…The Islamic State believes in the excommunication of the National Congress in Tripoli, all security and military institutions working under it, and all of their personnel…As for the Tripoli Parliament and Libya Dawn, be aware that just at the Islamic State took Al-Bayda and Tobruk, they can take Misrata and Tripoli, and you have seen some of their deeds in Tripoli". [20]

In late January, Barqawi had written an article titled, "No [other jihadist] organisation [can exist] under the Islamic State". It is probable that by 'other organisation' he probably meant al-Qaeda, since he asked the following question in that article, "What is keeping you, the soldiers of Ansar al-Sharia, from meeting your duty of pledging your allegiance to the caliph Ibrahim [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi]?" [21]

When all is said and done, the essence of the group's danger lies in how capable it is of recruiting fighters from other jihadist factions, especially given the fact that those fighters tend to be vulnerable to the appeal of the group's ideas, and more so if the group manage to secure bigger sources of funding.

Conclusion

While the current environment in Libya plays into the group's hands politically and militarily, the country is not yet ready to give them societal acceptance. The Islamic State's expansion hinges on whether or not the warring sides can manage to reach a political resolution to the Libyan crisis, reformulate the warring factions and manage to reintegrate them into legitimate institutions. Clearly, the group is up against colossal challenges, the foremost of which is finding societal acceptance that would ease their expansion. Another challenge is to meet the ever-growing demand for relief, aid and the necessary social services in areas they capture. Should a political solution fail to materialise, Libya might turn into a frontline for the Islamic State's operations in North Africa. Despite the uncertainty surrounding the group's actual power in Libya, given the large number of militant groups there, the threat posed by IS cannot be underestimated, much less ignored.

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