



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات  
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## Report

# Daesh in Libya: Myth or Reality?



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**A diverse mix of tribal groups fighting for their own interests have coalesced under government and military alliances [Reuters]**

## Abstract

As the Libya crisis worsens, there is growing concern about the presence and threat of Daesh in the North African country. Media headlines are full of warnings about Daesh's expansion in Libya with some outlets going as far as to speculate about the prospect of the group smuggling militants across the Mediterranean to Europe. While Daesh has certainly been able to secure a foothold in Libya and has also proved capable of exploiting the power vacuum that exists to carry out deadly attacks, a closer examination of the group suggests that such alarmist headlines are misleading. In fact Daesh in Libya still remains small, incoherent and as disjointed as the wider security environment in which it operates. This report examines the presence and power of Daesh in Libya and argues that while still a threat, the group will never will be able to achieve the same kind of momentum or power as it has elsewhere in the region.

## Introduction

As Libya's transition lunges from bad to worse, international attention is focusing increasingly on the presence and threat of Daesh in Libya. Media headlines are full of warnings about the group's expansion in the North African state, with some speculating about the prospect of IS militants smuggling themselves to the southern shores of Europe through migrant trafficking networks. These warnings have been fuelled in part by forces linked to Libya's officially recognised ruling authority the House of Representatives in Tobruk. The head of the National Forces Alliance, Mahmoud Jibril, told the World Economic Forum on North Africa and the Middle East in May 2015, "Libya is becoming a cradle of terrorism, and it's on the southern flanks of Europe. Just imagine those boatloads of immigrants carrying terrorists to European shores."<sup>(1)</sup> The General Commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA), Khalifa Haftar, meanwhile, warned in

March, IS will "spread in even the European countries if [the West] does not offer real help to the Libyan people, especially the Libyan army."<sup>(2)</sup>

However, a closer examination suggests that while Daesh is certainly present in Libya and has the power to inflict deadly attacks, such as the Qubbah bombings in February 2015 and the beheadings of the Egyptian Copts in the same month, these assertions of the group's power and reach may be exaggerated. Indeed, it is in the interests of those in the Tobruk camp, who have been desperately lobbying for the international community to provide assistance in its fight against its adversaries in Tripoli, to amplify Libya's terrorist problem.

At the other end of the spectrum, the 'Tripoli camp', comprising the reinstated General National Congress (GNC) and Operation Libya Dawn (the alliance of brigades from Misrata and a number of Islamist brigades from the capital and other western towns), has been somewhat in denial about the Daesh presence in Libya, preferring to focus its efforts on defeating what it perceives as the greater enemy, Haftar and his LNA forces. Although this camp seems to have finally woken up to the danger of Daesh as a result of the group's recent expansion in and around Sirte, it has sought to downplay talk of terrorism and of Daesh in particular. Following the attack on the Corinthia Hotel in January 2015 that was claimed by Daesh, for example, the former Prime Minister of the rival National Salvation Government in Tripoli, Omar Al-Hassi, accused the Tobruk camp of carrying out the assault with the possible assistance of the Egyptian intelligence services in order to "try to show that there is instability in the capital, where we have provided stability for the residents, and to give the impression that terrorist organizations are able to operate in Tripoli."<sup>(3)</sup>

The truth of Daesh's presence in Libya probably sits somewhere in between these two polarised positions. Although it is impossible to ascertain the group's exact strength and number, it seems to have implanted itself in a handful of areas and towns, some of which it now controls. This includes the coastal town of Derna, long associated with Islamist militancy and which has been almost entirely in the hands of extremist Islamist groups since the fall of the Qadhafi regime.

### **Daesh in Derna**

Reports of a Daesh presence in Derna first emerged in October 2014 the Shura Council of the Islamic Youth in Derna, which comprised members of Ansar Al-Sharia and Libyan elements from the Al-Battar Brigade who had returned from Syria, hosted a forum titled "Paving the Way for the Islamic State." According to media reports, the group pledged its allegiance to Daesh at this time. Since then Daesh elements have made their presence felt by meting out a number of grisly punishments, such as in April 2015 when

the group crucified three members of a local family. At the start of June 2015 the group also set up its own media kiosk in Derna to promote itself and its activities.

But from what one can ascertain Daesh's presence in Derna is still limited and the group is dwarfed by stronger militant Islamist forces operating in the town. This includes the Abu Slim Martyrs' Brigade that joined forces with other jihadist groups in December 2014 to form the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council in order to defend the town against Haftar's forces. According to a source in the Abu Slim Martyrs' Brigade Daesh elements were invited to join this council when it was established, but it refused on the grounds that it was a state and as such could not be a member of the council.<sup>(4)</sup>

In February 2015, this council moved to distance itself from Daesh, declaring, "We don't have anything to do with Daesh. Our loyalty is to Libya before anything else. We have no relation to Daesh in Iraq and Levant and we have no relation with the Daesh that exists in Sirte and the news that we paid allegiance to [Abu Bakr] Al-Baghdadi is baseless. Our loyalty is to Libya before anything else."<sup>(5)</sup> Then on 6 May the Council issued a statement condemning what it described as "one of those young idiots" from Daesh who had made a speech in the town's Fatma Zahra mosque accusing the Council of being kuffar [heathen]. The Council responded by describing Daesh as "half-men", emphasising that its members rather than Daesh were the only ones fighting against Haftar. It went on mockingly, "You are liars and you are nothing" before accusing Daesh of taking pictures of fuel tankers in a bid to convince locals that its members are providing fuel to the local community.

Thus while Daesh certainly has a presence in Derna, it is only one among a number of Islamist groups operating there, and lumping all these groups together and describing the town as a key Daesh hub is misleading. Furthermore, Daesh has little prospect of expanding beyond the town. On top of the presence of other groups, Derna is surrounded by hostile forces and tribes that will do their utmost to contain it.

### **Daesh in Sirte**

Daesh in Sirte, however, is another matter. It is here, in Qadhafi's birthplace, that Daesh has been able to gain a real foothold. Yet rather than representing a new force, Daesh seems to be more of a new label for existing groups that have hitched their wagon to the Daesh brand. The majority of Daesh militants in Sirte, as well as in the nearby town of Nawfaliya, were members of Ansar Al-Sharia before giving their allegiance to Daesh. As Muftah Marzouq of the Sirte Elders' Council explained, "the group whose members are keen on calling themselves Daesh are the same as Ansar Al-Sharia. All of them are from the town. We know them and their families personally."<sup>(6)</sup> Similarly, the head of the Sirte local council, Abdelfatah Siwi, commented in January, "Ansar Al-Sharia has been in



Sirte for the past two years at least. They have been living with us inside the town for months.”(7)

Indeed, Sirte proved to be a good incubator for Ansar Al-Sharia that became particularly strong after December 2013 when the Al-Zawiya Martyrs’ Brigade was pushed out of the town. This is partly because of the festering resentments born out of the revolution itself. During the 2011 revolution fighters from Misrata ransacked Sirte, taking their revenge against the former regime. Since then the town has been completely ignored by the new authorities and as one commentator described, “There is no fuel, no food, no money, no medicine. Life has become hell.”(8) Ansar Al-Sharia was able to tap into these grievances and to expand its presence in the town. Likewise Ansar Al-Sharia also had a strong presence in Nawfaliya, a town that has a particular history of jihadist activism.

Thus while it was reported in February 2015 that Daesh had taken control of Sirte and Nawfaliya, in reality these Daesh elements comprise mainly local sons of the towns who adopted the Daesh banner primarily as a means of inflating their potency. Furthermore, while the group is pushing to expand, one should not overplay its strength. It has tried on more than one occasion to seize the nearby town of Harawa but despite the town’s limited size has been unable to do so and its fighters have been repelled by the Awlad Suleiman confederation. Moreover, according to a member of the Sirte Elders’ Council, Daesh elements may be in control of Sirte but they cannot move freely in the town.(9) Thus while the group is present in the area and is seeking to widen its control, its power is still somewhat contained.

The group’s limited strength begs the question why Operation Libya Dawn has not been able to conquer Daesh in the area. The answer lies partly in a lack of political will. Although the Congress dispatched Brigade 166 to Sirte in February, this force, which was poorly armed and ill equipped, proved reluctant to act. The Brigade remained camped outside the town, preferring to rely on local tribes which it called on to mediate to try to convince Daesh elements to leave. This appears to have been partly because Brigade 166 feared causing civilian casualties. But it was also because these Daesh elements in Sirte were well known to the Tripoli camp and had long been accepted by them. Omar Al-Hassi, the former prime minister of the Tripoli government famously described Ansar Al-Sharia as “simple, beautiful and likeable”(10) while brigades from Misrata were more than happy to fight alongside Ansar Al-Sharia elements from Sirte when they jointly formed Operation Sunrise and advanced into the Oil Crescent in a bid to take over the eastern oil ports in December 2014.

It was only when Daesh elements began to denounce Operation Libya Dawn as Kuffar and most important of all to launch suicide attacks inside Misrata that the alliance woke up to the threat and started to fight the group with some conviction. Yet ousting Daesh

from the area is not going to be easy. The group has become so entrenched in the town and, importantly, for many local residents the presence of Daesh elements is preferable to being taken over by Misratan fighters, especially given the events of 2011 described above. Indeed, post-Qadhafi Libya has become so atomised that all conflicts and battles take on a regional dimension that transcends other considerations.

### Daesh Elsewhere?

Aside from in Derna and Sirte and its surrounding area, Daesh has struggled to gain any real foothold in other parts of Libya. Although the group has a small presence in the capital, where it has carried out a handful of attacks and issued threats such as its recent warning to families to withdraw their girls from Tripoli University, it has not been able to make any real inroads there. This is presumably because of the existence of more powerful Islamist brigades and groups that appear to have acted as a counterweight to the group.

More interestingly, Daesh has failed to establish itself to any meaningful degree in Benghazi, a city with a long history of Islamist militancy and that fell into the hands of an array of Islamist groups and brigades following the toppling the Qadhafi regime. Although there is some evidence that Daesh cells are operating in some neighbourhoods, the group appears to have little real appeal for those militants fighting under the umbrella of the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (which includes Ansar Al-Sharia) who are more preoccupied with their own survival and the fight against Haftar.

It is clear, therefore, that despite the enormous security vacuum, Daesh in Libya remains fragmented and comprises small disjointed cells of varying but limited strength that are caught up primarily in their own localised power struggles. This does not mean that the group does not represent a potent threat or that it will not prove capable of attracting new recruits and carrying out more deadly attacks. However, it is unlikely that the group will ever achieve the same kind of momentum, presence or coherence that it has in Syria or Iraq. Furthermore the scaremongering that has accompanied the emergence of Daesh in Libya both by local and international actors, risks obscuring the bigger point, namely that four years on from the revolution and Libya remains hostage to an array of competing groups, brigades and forces of varying ideological orientation, for whom local interest has subsumed any wider sense of the national good.

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## Endnotes

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