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ISLAMIC STATE'S RE-ORGANIZATION IN LIBYA AND POTENTIAL CONNECTIONS WITH ILLEGAL TRAFFICKING

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Program on Extremism or the George Washington University.

Introduction

The expulsion of the Islamic State (IS) from Sirte and Benghazi during the past year does not entail either the end of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's terrorist organization in Libya, nor the end of jihadist terrorism in the country overall. Instead, IS in Libya appears to be undergoing a phase of re-organization. Lately, IS militants have been able to attack both Khalifa Haftar's forces and the Misurata militias, who last year expelled IS from the city of Sirte. Some IS-affiliated militants regrouped south of Sirte where they were targeted by a U.S. air raid in September (the first of its type to have been conducted in Libya under the Trump administration), resulting in the deaths of 17 combatants. Although the jihadist organizations currently seem to be weak and dispersed, IS soldiers still have the capability to carry out guerilla warfare. This method of small-scale warfare benefits from the fragmentation of the Libyan counter-terrorism apparatus and the weak combat power of the allied Government of National Accord (GNA) troops.

The defeat of IS fighters in Sirte translates into less visibility and more fluidity among the remaining soldiers, with hundreds of them (mostly foreign fighters) likely wishing to return home or towards a different battlefield. These organizations are undergoing a deep process of reorganization and de-centralization into more remote areas. On September 24, 2017, IS issued a

statement from Cyrenaica inciting attacks against the United States and Italy, demonstrating a renewed ability to sow propaganda. While security conditions in Libya remain unstable and the government does not have a monopoly on the use of force, the baseline conditions for a presence of jihadist groups in the country will remain.

However, rather than a "territorial" return of IS in Libya, it is more likely that Al-Qaeda, specifically Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), might take advantage of the new "human capital" from former IS and Ansar al-Sharia members, especially in the southern part of the country. After the October 4th attack in Misurata, an escalation of terrorist attacks organized by members of IS is quite probable, as the group now seeks to engage in clandestine operations aimed at further destabilizing Libyan forces.

Moreover, given the remarkable loss of territorial control, the risk that IS will try to procure alternative sources of financing and find a role in the numerous illicit businesses in the country deserves greater attention.

From Sirte to Sabratha and Beyond

Many factors contributed to the rise of the self-proclaimed Caliphate in Libya. These factors include the breakdown of the state, internal conflicts, the relative marginalization of certain political, tribal, and local communities, radical opposition to marginalization and even a form of “jihadist tradition” historically present in some areas of the country.¹

Sirte

While the rise of IS in Derna was mainly spurred by inflows of fighters returning from Syria, the situation in Sirte was quite different. The context in Sirte appears similar to the context in Iraq which contributed to the growth of IS: the marginalization of specific populations encouraged tribes and former high-level officials to view al-Baghdadi’s movement as a lesser evil than what they considered to be a hostile regime. Although Libya has not experienced the same level of ethno-sectarian conflict that characterizes the Iraqi context, it is not a coincidence that IS broadened its operations in Sirte, the city where Muammar Qaddafi was born and that has always been a traditional reference point for the Qadhadhfa tribe. After Qaddafi’s ouster, the Qadhadhfa tribe was marginalized and ostracized by the Tripoli government and accused by other militias of connivance with the former regime. A portion of the young men of Qaddafi’s tribe – with

the tacit consent of their elders and the backing of people affiliated with the former regime – espoused the IS cause for reasons that were more political than ideological. This seems to explain why a number of the Colonel’s supporters were recycled into IS troops.² While the weight and presence of the former Libyan regime members in IS is much smaller than that of the ex-Baathist officers in the Syrian-Iraqi branch of IS, the contribution made by some of these “Qaddafian” officials made it possible to form a sizeable local military formation in Sirte.³

The ambivalence of relations between local communities and jihadist/IS groups remains a central point in the analysis of radicalization processes in Libya. For instance, the majority of the Libyan population did not support the rise of IS in the country. On its part, the Tripoli government initially refused to acknowledge the presence of IS in Sirte and in Tripolitania, and even went on to accuse former Qaddafi militias of fostering jihadist groups and aiding foreign infiltration. In reality, according to data from The Soufan Center and Italian diplomatic sources, the majority of IS militants in Sirte (around 80%) are actually foreign fighters, of which half appear to be Tunisian nationals.⁴ However, their presence in certain areas rather than others demonstrates that endogenous conditions make a difference. The intervention of Libyan troops, prevalently from Misurata under the formal direction of the Government of National Accord (aided by American bombings), made it possible to liberate Sirte in the fall of 2016. Nonetheless, a portion of

soldiers of the self-proclaimed Caliphate – whose total sum reached somewhere between 5,000 to 6,000 jihadists at the height of combat (a figure sometimes exaggerated by the media) – managed to flee and disperse outside of the city. Afterwards, some of them were targeted by an American raid in January 2017 on a rebuilt operational base south of the city.⁵ Recent accusations of looting and property seizing by Misuratan soldiers in Sirte suggest that there may again be systemic marginalization of certain populations. These events mirror dynamics in Iraq and Syria, where NGOs and human rights agencies accuse the anti-IS militias of committing serious crimes in areas retaken from the group.

Sabratha

The heavy presence of Tunisian jihadists in Sabratha characterized what could be defined as a “third model” (differing from Derna and Sirte) of territorial takeover by Daesh in Libya. In Sabratha, Tunisian fighters affiliated with IS controlled an anti-Tunisia training camp. In February 2016, an American raid on a training camp in the city killed 40 IS militants accused of planning two largescale attacks on Western tourists in Tunisia. The raid revealed the large number of Tunisian foreign fighters in Sabratha, and justified the West’s increasing concern about the creation of a new base for IS troops in an illicit trafficking hub. In fact, Sabratha is a Mediterranean outlet of the trafficking corridor that runs from sub-Saharan Africa through Fezzan to the Libyan coasts. Sabratha could have been a

third model of IS development in Libya, illustrating a very different strategy compared to those used in Derna and Sirte. The group’s aim in Sabratha was to launch attacks into nearby Tunisia, not in Libya, proliferating in hiding without the proclamations typical of the IS narrative. The U.S. air strike had the immediate consequence of instigating military action by local brigades against remaining IS troops, *de facto* ending a situation of *omertà* and tolerance towards the jihadist presence in the city. The local military council eventually forced IS to abandon Sabratha. According to a United Nations report, these IS troops are still operating in the area stretching from Tripoli to the Tunisian border, mainly in the rural zones. Some foreign fighters have crossed the Tunisian border, while others retrenched in Sirte – at the time still in IS hands – in Tripoli and in the rural areas around Sabratha in the foothills of the Nefusa mountains.⁶ This is a very worrisome fact, more so because this area could become a recruitment base for terrorist attacks directed at Europe. Salman Abeidi, the Libyan Manchester terrorist, traveled several times from Libya to Great Britain and had strong connections in this area.

Militant Jihadists in Southern Libya

A different case is represented by the southern region of Fezzan. Radical groups tied to AQIM, al-Murabitun, and Ansar al-Dine are still present and very active in this region, often engaging in illegal business. This evidence continues to make the area a possible “sanctuary” for criminal and terrorist organizations. In Fezzan, IS and AQIM conducted two rival campaigns while at the same time engaging in sporadic, circumstantial relations. Such relations were grounded on a substantial exchange of expertise, mostly regarding weapons, transportation, and other fields of illegal trafficking.⁷

In January 2016, an AQIM video openly accused Italy of neo-colonialism for its attempt to politically mediate between the Libyan factions by hosting the Libyan summit meeting in Rome on 13 December 2015. The video featured Abu Yusuf al-Anabi, AQIM’s second in command. The interest of AQIM in Libya seems to indicate that al-Qaeda has not relinquished its role in the country. AQIM is likely delegating its regional organization in North Africa to spread its influence, with particular attention to the Fezzan theatre. However, with respect to this *communiqué*, the strategy seems aimed at mustering the Libyan factions against the new “invader” evoked by old ghosts. AQIM presented itself as “the unifier combatting new colonialism”.⁸

Since IS began its campaign in Sirte, it seemed to have different goals from al-Qaeda and the various local jihadist groups. At the same time, however, there were some tactical convergences on specific goals. IS sympathizers like Ansar al-Sharia and former al-Qaeda members came together to fight Haftar in the city of Benghazi, uniting as the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council. Elsewhere, as in Derna, the various jihadist groups fought against one another. On the other hand, it is also true that the demarcation line between IS and Ansar al-Sharia have become increasingly fluid over time. Individuals or whole armed factions of Ansar al-Sharia sided with IS, as the Sirte case demonstrated. In the southern part of the country, the increasingly active pro-Haftar troops may once again use their pre-existing ties with IS to facilitate a coalition between Islamic and jihadist militias. The inflow of hundreds of IS fighters from Sirte may exacerbate this dynamic.

Most of the transnational jihadists active in southern Libya have a long history of local knowledge, stemming from the Sahel insurrections of the 1990s and the Algerian civil war. During the 2011 revolution, these groups established relations with local armed forces and jihadists in the north, particularly in the northeastern area of Benghazi, Derna and Aidabiva. Fezzan’s logistic corridor first shuffled groups of AQIM soldiers from the south towards the Ansar al-Sharia networks, aiding the arrival of jihadists from Algeria, Mali and the Sahel into the northern training camps, and subsequently into Syria. In response, Ansar al-Sharia stated that it

had sent volunteers to Mali while training troops faithful to the Algerian jihadist Mokhtar Belmokhtar, prior to the January 2013 attack on the Tiguentourine gas plant in Amenas, Algeria.⁹

Local collaborators in Fezzan facilitated some of these movements. Among the most frequently cited in the UN report¹⁰ on the jihadist presence in the area is the Border Guards Brigade 315, or Maghawir Brigade. The Brigade is a militia based in Ubari, led by a former army officer and Islamist educator, Ahmed Umar al-Ansari, residing in the southern part of the city along the route to Niger by way of the Salvador Pass. According to Frederick Wehrey (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) and several other analysts who were able to conduct on-site surveys, it should be acknowledged that enemies of the Tuareg have often exaggerated the gravity of extremist penetration in Ubari and Western areas of Fezzan. Despite the proven existence of jihadists and their camps around Ghat and in the mountain valleys of Aracus, this presence is mostly motivated by logistic reasons, and can be traced to weak control by government and the police rather than widespread social support. For example, the group that conducted the attack on Amenas in 2013 passed through areas north of Ghat easily, precisely because the local brigades were unable to stop jihadist movement. For its part, AQIM seems to concentrate specifically on the Sahel as a primary area of expansion, exploiting Libya for logistical depth, although in the summer of 2016 it appealed to its fighters to mobilize against Haftar's forces.

When relations exist between jihadists and local armed groups, they are based less on ideological affiliations and more on common interests in keeping borders free of control. The penetration of radical ideology in the southern areas controlled by the Tuareg – or more widely in the social weave of the south – is minimal, despite what is stated by the forces tied to Operation Dignity and the Tebu population. The various reports from the intelligence services of the different Libyan factions regarding the spread of IS after the fall of Sirte should be closely examined, given their interest in depicting their adversaries as terrorists. In fact, IS never really extended its sphere of influence to southern Libya. Any attempt to influence or be present in the south will encounter not only a crowded market of armed groups tied to local communities and tribes, as already noted, but also networks affiliated with al-Qaeda. Even in northeastern Libya a good number of fighters that had defected from groups close to al-Qaeda or Ansar al-Sharia and joined IS are now returning to al-Qaeda. How this dynamic will evolve in the southern part of the country remains to be seen.

Indeed, the spreading of IS through the south might have gone further. Other IS than those bombed by the US in late January 2017 – and in September more recently – more camps may be located south of Sirte. Independent sources report that somewhere between 60 to 80 militants are active near Girza, a town located 170 km West of Sirte; another group of about 100 is located near Zalla and the Mabrouk oil wells (some 300 km

southeast of Sirte); a third group is located in the Al Uwaynat area¹¹. IS has recently demonstrated its ability to successfully operate in the area, as proven by the attack on the power plants between Jufra and Sebha. In addition, as early as the summer of 2016 there were reports of the presence of pro-IS jihadists on the borders between Libya and Sudan, near the oases of Kufra and Tazirbu where the terrorist group (according to what was stated) reached an agreement with local smugglers to protect their northern supply lines.¹²

Illegal Trafficking and Possible Convergence with Jihadist Groups

The smuggling activities undertaken by various militias and armed groups clearly represent part of a broader situation of resource plundering, which characterizes the socio-political scenario of post-revolutionary Libya. These activities tie together the interests of families, tribes, and local communities, leading to an increase in the perception of the legitimacy of smuggling, or at least the reiteration of the view that such activities are a necessary evil in order to protect communities from rival or antagonistic groups. The involvement of militias in smuggling – whether by taxing the illegal businesses in their area or directly setting up trafficking networks – has clearly redefined the market, which today can hardly be called “free”. That description might

have held true only in the first period following the fall of the Qaddafi regime. An analysis of the “market” for smuggling, developed – for instance – by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime,¹³ points out that obtaining trade protection definitively ensures the network’s position on the market. What is occurring is a “militarization” of trafficking, which pushes small operators out of the market and concentrates smuggling in the hands a few, well-organized criminal networks. The ability to access the territory offered by Libyan militias has broadened the logistical capability of the smugglers. This access further increases the smuggler’s efficiency, above all in a period of seemingly limitless demand. It is precisely this greater capability that has led to the rapid increase in smugglers after the revolution, especially after 2013. As is widely acknowledged,¹⁴ clear signs exist that certain networks have evolved into transnational consortiums able to manage routes and volumes of people that require considerable logistical and financial capabilities. Particularly relevant is the fact that different networks are sharing their respective resources. This is a new phenomenon for the Libyan context that has significant implications for policy formulation. In mid-September, fighting erupted in Sabratha, a key human trafficking hub, after an armed group clamped down on migrant boat departures, prompting a cross-town rival to retaliate. Tail Beach, located in the tourist complex of Sabratha, appeared to be a major hub. Some relevant personalities – militia leaders of the city such as

Mohamed Koshlaf and Ahmed (alias Amu) Dabbashi, or local entrepreneurs such as Mussab Abu Ghrein – played a significant role in the last few years and have likely established contacts with the jihadist groups. It is not a coincidence that several IS Tunisian militias settled in this area, attempting to finance their activities by exploiting illicit human trafficking or through redemption payments following the detention of migrants. Since 2015, Sabratha has been identified as a potential meeting point between IS members and organizations specializing in human trafficking.¹⁵

In Libya, there are 24 official detention centers for migrants, and likely dozens of illegal centers. Many militias seek to credit these illegal centers to the central authority, as this would favor government financing for their management. It is therefore clear that, in order to effectively deal with the challenges posed by the migration crises in Libya, it is necessary to tackle the issue of the resources that are funded by human trafficking. A fundamental goal should be to break up the transnational networks that have consolidated over recent years by gradually isolating the criminal leaders from other groups and individuals whose livelihoods, in the absence of alternatives, have come to depend on them. Stories of local communities that successfully opposed human traffickers could serve as examples. In 2015 for instance, in the port city of Zuwara, citizens' militias actively opposed smugglers, forcing them to abandon the city, which was long known as the biggest port of departure. The local population's

disdain for trafficking increased after an accident that killed 650 people was widely shared on social media. Inaction by the Libyan government and the international community was harshly criticized, and protesters demanded that measures be taken against the smugglers.

The risk exists that terrorist organizations might leverage Libya's destabilization to finance themselves through smuggling, specifically through human trafficking. However, this risk currently seems unlikely for two reasons. First, jihadist groups in Libya seem to be in a phase of weakness and dispersion. The defeat of the IS forces in Sirte decreased their visibility and increased the fluidity of the remaining troops, who probably number around several hundred. Many of this number are foreign fighters who seek to return home or travel elsewhere. In the short term these organizations seem destined for a profound regrouping and decentralization into more remote areas. The largest and most dangerous groups remain those tied to al-Qaeda, and to AQIM in particular. They could take advantage of the availability of the former fighters of IS and Ansar al-Sharia who have recently left their organizations. Given the political situation, Libya remains attractive for jihadist groups. Secondly, the trafficking market appears to be fairly closed because it is run by international operators with the help of Libyan militia networks, a convergence of alliances based on shared financial interests. At present, it is hard to compete with these actors,

who have basically begun a process of specializing in and “industrializing” the trafficking business.

However, several trends persist, which seem to suggest that jihadism in Libya, although weakened, may evolve in the future, particularly by exploiting illicit traffic as a source of income and financing:

- Dangers could stem from the support provided by tribes and militias involved in trafficking or active in trafficking hubs that decide to embrace radicalism. In Libya – aside from Derna, which prides itself on its familiarity with a radical view of Islam – political marginalization drives support for radical Islam which is why some areas are at risk again to turn into hot spots.
- Sirte remains in the front line of a potential three-way confrontation in central Libya between the Misurata militias, the brigades defending Benghazi and the Libyan National Army. As this situation continues, it is likely that other actors will get involved in the conflict, triggering new tensions among communities that could potentially destabilize the region. This could create the conditions for a re-launch of IS or local jihadist groups spurred by the marginalization of specific tribes.
- Another potentially sensitive area is Bani Walid, a zone neglected and ostracized by Tripoli in recent years because local

members of the Warfalla tribe were either neutral or pro-Qaddafi in the conflict of 2011. For now, the elders seem to have rejected a tactical convergence with pro-IS forces; however, precisely because of their marginalization, many young people seem drawn to jihadist proselytizing.

- In the southern part of the country, Tuareg militias remain partially vulnerable to banding together with jihadist groups, especially those tied to AQIM. Excluded from most trafficking after loses to the Tebu, the Tuareg remain politically marginalized and in constant symbiosis with jihadist groups elsewhere (for instance, in Mali). These militias could pursue a new form of revenge in partnerships with terrorist organizations.
- According to UNHCR, there are still more than 217,000 internally displaced persons in Libya. More than 278,000 people recently returned home and are considered people of concern in humanitarian emergencies, and at risk of radicalization. This high number of displaced people could become an important jihadist recruitment basin.
- In general, an escalation of the conflict between the troops tied to Haftar, the

militias, and the political forces they view as “terrorists” could lead to a progressive radicalization of the latter. Specifically, it is necessary to prevent a new convergence of Islamist militias present in Libya. Some of these militias, such as the Brigades for the Defense of Benghazi, have clear ties with militias inside the GNA and with extremist groups, in particular al-Qaeda. Some of the people that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates recently put on a terrorist black-list (Ali and Ismail Sallabi, Abdel Hakim Belhaj, Sadiq Al Gharyani and Madhi Al-Harati) – have always been opposed to Haftar and are politically and militarily influential both inside the capital, Tripoli, and elsewhere. A renewed political polarization in Libya, also reflected by international partisanship, would probably lead to a new period of conflict in the country and a worrisome consolidation of the Islamist-jihadist axis, with enlargement of the latter’s base of consensus. As we have seen, some of these groups occupy key areas of the country.

Countering the Trafficking-Jihadist Nexus

Consequently, while remaining aware that the issue of migration is aggravated by the broader political and social context in sub-Saharan countries, from which many migrants originate, certain political actions could help stem the potential overlapping of interests between actors involved in human trafficking and jihadists.

Certainly, a long-term solution to human trafficking requires economic alternatives for developing the region and areas most afflicted by the migration phenomenon. This in turn requires stability deriving from an end to political conflict, a stable economy and infrastructure repairs. In recent months, Italy has promoted a significant policy shift on migration through Libya which resulted in a notable decrease in flows. This strategy is based on three pillars: an agreement with the armed groups controlling the major hubs of people smuggling in Tripolitania; the establishment of a functional Libyan Search and Rescue Area (SAR); and negotiations with Libya’s southern tribes to stop the flows in the Fezzan region¹⁶. It is too early to verify if the current system will hold long enough to produce a durable trend. In any case, this policy should be accompanied by a more efficient redistribution of oil income. In southwestern Libya, for example, a normal return to production in the major oilfields could have a positive influence on local and

regional economies. The recent re-opening of two important oil fields—El Feel (which pumped 80,000 barrels a day) and Sharara (more than 200,000 bpd)—could have an encouraging impact on the local economy, thanks to the full functioning of the power plants, local airports, and transportation infrastructure. To achieve this, the international community alongside the international oil companies working in Libya should start to invest more in local development, and avoid entrusting security to the armed groups that simultaneously play a key role in trafficking, which would only cement the situation and make it irreversible.

Reducing illicit trafficking could also be achieved by reducing subsidies on goods. In 2012, subsidized goods accounted for about 25% of Libya's GDP, with important effects on their smuggling. A subsidized good par excellence is gasoline: if it is smuggled abroad, it becomes a large source of income. The price per liter in Libya is 10 cents, while in Chad it costs a dollar. Libyan financial institutions and the GNA should be incentivized to a profound revision of Libya's rentier state structure, replacing subsidies with direct redistribution of income to the poorest families and incentivizing businesses.

Generally, to combat human trafficking key European and Libyan actors should promote and facilitate local dialogue. Discussions should concern the political recognition and inclusion of the leaders of certain armed groups, trying to

make them aware of their responsibilities, as well as those of the tribal communities they belong to, especially those with a history of marginalization. For the purposes of gaining greater influence and legitimacy, local representatives could facilitate seeking solutions in exchange for an increase in income deriving from renewed oil production. A securitizing approach and the presence of international missions in the southern part of the country or on the Niger-Libya border should be postponed until an advanced process has begun of redistributing oil revenues and economically rebuilding the areas involved in trafficking. In fact, until this is accomplished, there is a danger that depriving local communities of income from smuggling could inspire communities to side with radical militias against the international community.

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