

# LIBYA'S FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL

## DEFEATING JIHADIST NETWORKS

September 2015



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CEP uses its research and analytical expertise to build a global movement against the threat to pluralism, peace and tolerance posed by extremism of all types. In the United States, CEP is based in New York City with a team in Washington, D.C.







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Edited by Arturo Varvelli

**COUNTER**  
**EXTREMISM**  
**PROJECT**



EUROPEAN FOUNDATION FOR  
**DEMOCRACY**







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# FOREW



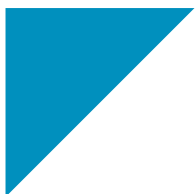
WORD



## FOREWORD



# FOREWORD



This publication is a compilation of four different essays, edited by Arturo Varvelli, which form part of a series of studies undertaken by EFD to analyse the nature and spread of the phenomenon of radicalisation in the European Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods. It focuses on Libya and assesses the current situation on the ground through a number of diverse and varied prisms. It identifies patterns and trends as well as specific local and regional developments in order to provide a comprehensive overview of the situation of radicalisation in post-Qaddafi Libya and the extent to which this may be contributing to regional as well as international instability.

Months of acute political turmoil in Libya following the fall of the Qaddafi regime, compounded by a weak national identity as well as legacies from the civil war in 2011 which ended Qaddafi's 42-year rule, have resulted in Libya becoming a failed state with a strong radical Islamist presence. As a result, the country has become a safe haven for local, regional and international Jihadist groups including Al-Qaeda (AQ), Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and so-called Islamic State (IS), among others. The result is a security vacuum in the country which threatens regional stability and by extension Europe's too. In their essay, **'Competing Jihadist Organisations and Networks'**, Stefano Torelli and Arturo Varvelli provide an overview of the main Jihadist networks, their modus operandi and strategies as well as those of other groups and organisations in Libya that are vying for control. They also undertake an analysis of which groups are gaining and which are losing. The authors also examine the regional connections in relation to Algeria and Tunisia and demonstrate the interconnectedness between and among the various groups.

In their essay, **'Political Party or Armed Faction? The Future of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood'**, authors Valentina Colombo, Giuseppe Dentice and Arturo Varvelli explore in detail the role of the organisation within the Libyan political firmament. They argue that the Brotherhood is weaker in Libya than in other Arab states, where their traditional welfare activities have had limited importance there. In a reinvention of their role, the Libyan MB has distanced itself from the more extreme jihadi actors, who have not yet renounced violence. In its attempt to reassert internal control, the MB has aimed to strengthen links with society and foster credibility at the international level. This essay evaluates the influence of regional and local factors, including the diverse ideological, political, economic, social and historical contexts of the MB's presence in Libya. It analyses the Libyan MB's attitude towards terrorist groups, democratic processes and the reconciliation talks envisaged by the UN. It also



draws conclusions about the potential of the MB and its military affiliates vis-à-vis gaining and maintaining strength in the country.

Following Libya's 2011 civil war many armed groups emerged. They still survive as both official and non-official military units. Although some constitute potential recruitment basins for Islamic State, others could in fact deter its expansion. As jihadist forces gain in relevance, a full understanding of the underlining dynamics requires careful evaluation of the diverse galaxy of Libyan 'Islamist' militias. Actors on the ground follow geographical, ideological and historical divisions, presenting differences in tactics, objectives and narratives - as well as contradicting similarities. In their essay '**Mapping Libya's Radical Islamist Militias**', authors Wolfgang Pusztaï and Arturo Varvelli undertake a comprehensive review of radical Islamist militias in the country before examining differentiating patterns of militancy, tactics and trends, attitudes of tribal groups towards Islamism and goals of jihadist militias, as well as explaining the competing definitions of the term 'radical Islamists'.

In her essay, '**The exploitation of migration routes to Europe**', Nancy Porsia analyses the phenomenon of people-trafficking in Libya and assesses whether migrant routes to Europe are at risk of fundamentalist infiltration. According to documents written by the group's supporters, Islamic State militants are planning a takeover of Libya as a 'gateway' to waging war across the whole of southern Europe. Security officials are aware of the possibility that people-trafficking boats may be used to smuggle fighters into Europe. Even if the claims of the militants regarding the use of migrant boats seem exaggerated, Islamic State appears to be a growing threat in Libya and the risk of such infiltration remains plausible. Porsia discusses how radical Islamist groups may have approached the human trafficking market by capitalising on divisions between and among brokers. If confirmed, this should be analysed in the context of the expansion of Islamic fundamentalist ideology across the entire MENA region, in combination with the economic crisis in Libya that has resulted from the current crisis in the oil industry.





# ESSAY COMPETITION



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ESSAY 1



# COMPETING JIHADIST ORGANISATIONS AND NETWORKS



## ESSAY 1

# COMPETING JIHADIST ORGANISATIONS AND NETWORKS

## Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Ansar al-Sharia in Libya

Stefano Maria Torelli and Arturo Varvelli



Islamic State (IS) is only the most recent terrorist group to have found a place in Libya and the Maghreb. The jihadist panorama in Libya is very broad. In recent years various Salafi jihadist networks have found refuge there. The months' long period of extreme crisis in Libya has deep causes and distant origins, which range from a weak Libyan national identity to legacies from the civil war of 2011, which did not end with the death of Qaddafi and the fall of his regime. One of the main and very concrete consequences of this instability has been the transformation of Libya into a failed state with a strong radical Islamist presence.

Islamic identity arose as the preponderant element after the fall of the regime. With everyone identifying themselves as Muslim and little conflict in the doctrinal sphere (there is no sectarian division as Libyan Islam adheres to the Maliki school), Islam emerged as a legitimising element in society and also in politics. At the same time competition to represent this element arose between the new political parties, revitalised religious figures (such as the Grand Mufti) and radical groups of various origins. Among these representatives are explicitly jihadist groups which are trying to impose the creation of a caliphate in Libya on the population, even if this means using force.

The semi-anarchic Libya is experiencing a very worrying phenomenon: it has quickly become a safe haven for local, foreign (i.e. Tunisian and Egyptian) and international jihadist groups, such as Al-Qaeda (AQ), Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Islamic State (IS). The new regional scenario is fostering more assertive and more radical positions within



Libyan jihadism, which is thought to be the target of 'external plots' that aim to undermine its post-revolutionary achievements.

The Libyan jihadist situation is highly volatile but the internationalisation of some local groups, such as *Ansar al-Sharia in Libya* (ASL), has become more evident. The various militias, groups and networks appear to be interlinked. While foreign and international networks seem to have different aims and there is growing competition for the power they hold, tactical convergence on specific targets and goals is increasingly probable. As mentioned in a RAND Corporation report,<sup>1</sup> several other Salafi jihadist groups enjoy sanctuary in Libya: the Muhammad Jamal Network (from Egypt), which has established a presence in northern areas such as Benghazi and Derna; Mokhtar Belmokhtar's al-Murabitun in the south-west near Ghat, Awbari and Tasawah; AQIM in parts of south-western and north-eastern Libya; and *Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia* (AST) in areas including Zuwarah, Darna and Ajdabiya. Elsewhere in North Africa, Mokhtar Belmokhtar's al-Murabitun has established a presence in an arc of territory that includes Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger and Mauritania.

## The security vacuum and the polarisation of the political landscape

On 27 January 2015, Islamists stormed the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli, killing 10 people. The attack has been attributed to a self-proclaimed IS cell in Tripoli. On 15 February 2015 a five-minute video was published, showing the beheading of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians on a beach on the southern Mediterranean coast, probably in the Libyan city of Sirte. These actions are symptomatic of the deterioration of the security situation in the country. On 16 February 2015 the Egyptian military conducted airstrikes on IS facilities in Libya, targeting training locations and weapons stockpiles near Sirte and Derna.

In May 2014 Khalifa Haftar, a retired general, launched a military campaign (Operation Dignity) to purge Libya of Islamists in Cyrenaica. His campaign was politically supported by the National Force Alliance (NFA, the more secularist party led by Mahmud Jibril) and probably assisted by Egyptian special forces. Libyan warplanes bombed a base belonging to the February 17<sup>th</sup> Martyrs Brigade, one of the Islamist-leaning armed groups operating in Benghazi, and an Ansar al-Sharia militant base in the west of the city. The strikes came just after Ansar al-Sharia had vowed to fight back against Haftar and had warned against foreign intervention.

As a result of these strikes, Haftar, a controversial figure from Qaddafi's regime, rapidly gained popular support because the residents of Benghazi and Derna were crippled with

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<sup>1</sup> S. G. Jones, A Persistent Threat. The Evolution of al Qa'ida and Other Salafi Jihadists, RAND Corporation, 4 June 2014, accessed at [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR600/RR637/RAND\\_RR637.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR600/RR637/RAND_RR637.pdf) on 14 May 2015.



fear after two years of daily assassinations and a series of politically motivated terrorist bombings. The military confrontation in Cyrenaica increased political tension in Tripoli. The

secular and anti-Islamist forces were part of the political polarisation in Libya: they were also probably influenced by what had happened in the region, in particular, the military takeover in Egypt and the rise of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. The NFA dismissed the legitimacy of the General National Council (GNC) since it was considered to be too strongly influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists. Furthermore, the NFA tried to promote a narrative for the international community (the US and the EU in particular) which placed all the blame on Islamists. This denied them any institutional role as they would be 'unfit' to govern in a democratic regime. Haftar not only moved against Ansar al-Sharia but also declared he would 'cleanse Libya of the Muslim Brotherhood', thereby blurring the lines between terrorist and Islamist

groups. While extremist groups recruit from the disillusioned margins of society, Islamist groups enjoy a degree of public support from sizable constituencies in Libya.<sup>2</sup>

In 2013–14 the GNC's activities and role were 'defended' by the Muslim Brotherhood and some Salafist movements, while secularists considered it to be under the Islamist spell. This paralysed the GNC and had associated negative consequences on the institution-building process. It also made room for laws and decrees to be ignored or not implemented. Unfortunately, this polarisation was not only political (with the creation of two parliaments, one in Tobruk and the other in Tripoli), but also became an armed conflict. Both the secularist and Islamist groups have links with militias: the former with Al Qa'qa, the Zintan militia and Haftar's Libyan Army (Operation Dignity); the latter with Misurata's militias, the Libya Revolutionaries Operations Room (LROR) in Tripoli and the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries (Operation Dawn) (see Figure 1). In this context, according to some observers,<sup>3</sup> the struggle between the two groups is also a façade that disguises the struggle for political supremacy in the country. This struggle involves both

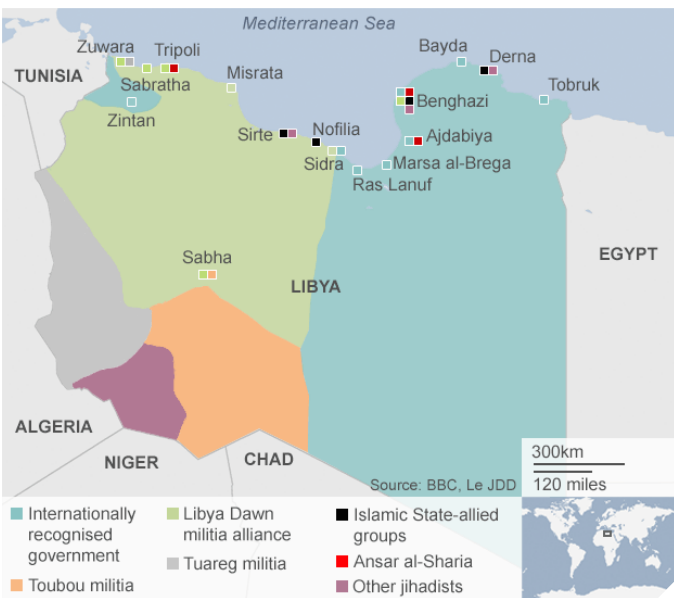


Figure 1: Political map of Libya.

Source: BBC.com, 'Who Wants What in Libya?', 11 March 2015, accessed at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31815616> on 14 May 2015.

<sup>2</sup> A. el Gomati, 'Khalifa Haftar: Fighting Terrorism or Pursuing Political Power?', Al Jazeera, 10 June 2014 accessed at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/06/khalifa-hifter-operation-dignity-20146108259233889.html> on 14 May 2015.

<sup>3</sup> J. A. Khaled, 'Libya's Struggle: Weapons, Military Factions and Generals', Aspenia Online, 4 June 2014, accessed at <https://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspenia-online/article/libya%E2%80%99s-struggle-weapons-military-factions-and-generals> on 14 May.



regional and international powers, with Turkey and Qatar taking the Islamist side, and Egypt and the Gulf States the other.<sup>4</sup>

## The state of jihad in Libya and the rise of IS

Under Qaddafi's regime, jihadism represented one of the few practical responses available to personal religious or political dissatisfaction with the strongly illiberal system that prohibited activities by Islamist groups. In fact, global jihad outside Libya became a sort of substitute for Islamic activities within the country. This explains the high numbers of Libyan citizens (especially from Derna and eastern Libya) amongst AQ groups or Salafi jihadist movements in Iraq, Afghanistan and, more recently, Syria, where Libyan mujahidin now form the most numerous national group of foreign fighters.

It is interesting to note that this 'jihadist attitude' is more linked to a traditional way of expressing discontent and dissatisfaction with the domestic situation (rooted in the Qaddafi period) than to real theological extremism. As has been shown,<sup>5</sup> it seems to be a sort of 'functional jihadism' more than a doctrinal one. However, there are indications that Libyan jihadists active in Afghanistan and Iraq—who have been exposed to the message and proselytism of Eastern *da'wa* movements such as the Deobands and the Tabligh al-Jamaat—represent a channel of diffusion for the ideas of these radical movements, strictly based on their dogmatic approach to Islamic orthopraxis. At the same time, their rigid approach to ritual personal purity and absolute adherence to a very strict interpretation of shariah principles may further radicalise their activism and their militancy (see Figure 2).

Consequently, Libyan jihadists form the largest group of foreign fighters supporting AQ and the other militias in Iraq, Afghanistan and, most recently, Syria. The important role of returnee jihadists in expanding the jihadist network across the Middle East (and in Western countries, too) is well known and has been widely studied. Jihadists returning from the front line to their towns and tribes are generally afforded greater status as mujahidin. They are, therefore, in a position to radicalise their original environment, with extremist proselytism and radical mimetism being the favoured methods; to create new jihadist groups and cells; to carry out the training of new members and upgrade local militants' combat capability; and

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4 For example, it is reported that the United Arab Emirates offered Haftar backing of US \$ 800 m, which included money paid to armed groups willing to join Operation Dignity. This aid reportedly includes Egyptian backing. See C. Tawil, 'Operation Dignity: General Haftar's Latest Battle May Decide Libya's Future', Terrorism Monitor 12/11 (31 May 2014), accessed at [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=42443&cHash=24a38c40982c66819e7196d24603335b#.VVRtEfnlHw](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42443&cHash=24a38c40982c66819e7196d24603335b#.VVRtEfnlHw) on 14 May 2015.

5 S. M. Torelli and A. Varvelli, 'New Trends in North African Jihadism, Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and Libya', in A. Plebani (ed.), *New (and Old) Patterns of Jihadism: Al-Qaida, the Islamic State and Beyond* (Milan: Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, 2014), 51–9.



to enlarge extremist networks, with the diffusion of Salafi jihadist ideology, thus delegitimising traditional local authorities.

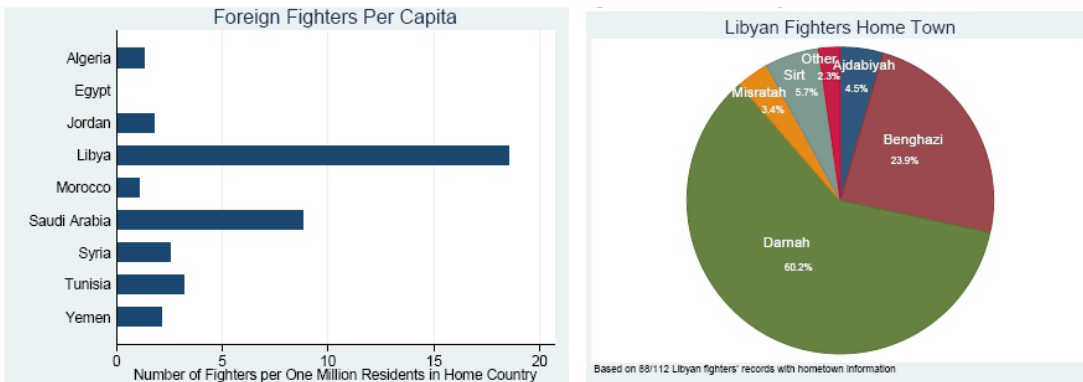


Figure 2: Libyan mujahidin in Iraq, as of 2005

Source: J. Felter and B. Fishman, *Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, New York, 9 and 12.

In Cyrenaica and Derna, a city of 80,000 on the Mediterranean coast, this increased ability to radicalise has become well-established over the past decade. However, the Syrian/Iraqi campaign has significantly boosted it, creating a wave of returnee fighters which is having a disastrous effect on the security situation in Libya. In October 2014 a local jihadist group, the

Islamic Youth Shura Council (Shabaab al-Islam), claimed Derna in the name of IS, showing how IS could break with traditional notions of territorial contiguity by creating an enclave outside of its 'borders' in Syria and Iraq. IS leadership accepted the proclamation a few weeks later and formally annexed the city. This seems to be the result of an expansion plan formulated in Syria and Iraq: the first of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's militants arrived in Libya last spring, when the men of the al-Battar Brigade, composed entirely of volunteer Libyans, began to return from the war in Syria and Iraq. In Libya the brigade was composed of three hundred jihadists who had previously been deployed in Deir Ezzor (Syria) and Mosul (Iraq). As mentioned in a CNN report, in November 2014<sup>6</sup> the Derna branch of IS had about eight hundred fighters and operated half a dozen camps on the outskirts of the town, as well as having larger facilities in the nearby mountains. Today it is probable that IS can count on a few thousand 'soldiers' in Cyrenaica, despite IS having lost control of much of the city of Derna in July 2015, due to the military action of local militia groups.

In September 2014, with the aim of helping the al-Battar Brigade, al-Baghdadi organised the takeover of Derna by dispatching one of his senior aides, Abu Nabil al-Anbari, an Iraqi

<sup>6</sup> According to Noman Benotman, a former Libyan jihadist terrorism analyst at the Quilliam Foundation, interviewed by CNN. P. Cruickshank, N. Robertson, T. Lister and J. Karadsheh, 'IS comes to Libya', CNN, 18 November 2014, accessed at <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/11/18/world/IS-libya/> on 14 May 2015.



IS veteran.<sup>7</sup> Al-Anbari and al-Baghdadi met in a prison camp in Iraq prior to fighting together in the ranks of IS. The city of Derna had an autonomous administrative organisation governed by a little-known Saudi (or Yemeni) preacher, Mohammed Abdullah, whose *nom de guerre* is Abu al-Baraa el-Azdi. Like many of the militiamen who founded the 'Province of Cyrenaica' ('Wilayat of Barqa'), el-Azdi fought in Syria. Derna has become the major new hub where fighters from North Africa, primarily Tunisia, are recruited. Of the at least 3000 Tunisians who have joined IS, many have found protection in Libya.

The Derna branch of IS includes several other militias that have recently pledged allegiance to the Caliph: the Rafallah Sahati Brigade, which was part of Ansar al-Sharia; the February 17<sup>th</sup> Martyrs Brigade; The Shield of Libya; and Jaish al-Mujahidin. Besides its obvious presence in Sirte, now his stronghold, IS in Libya claims to have activated other cells of fighters in Benghazi, al-Khums and even in the capital, Tripoli. In recent months, to demonstrate the presence of IS in Libya, images of militiamen who have declared loyalty to the Caliph—in locations ranging from the capital to Benghazi—have been published on social networks. In December 2014, a car bomb exploded in Tripoli's Sidi Masri area without injuring anyone. Responsibility was claimed by the 'Islamic State of Tripoli', evidently the local representative of IS. However, even after the attack on the Corinthia Hotel, members of Libyan Dawn, the Islamist coalition in control of Tripoli, continue to deny the existence of any such organisation in the capital. Nonetheless, it is widely believed that there is a branch there, even if it does not have many members. The IS leadership in Iraq has named an 'emir of Tripoli', a Tunisian known, according to some reports, by the *nom de guerre* of Abu Talha.<sup>8</sup> On Sunday 8 February 2015, a huge convoy of so-called IS fighters entered the town of Nawfalayah, located in the Sirte district of Libya. Pictures of a large 'IS' parade in the city, with black flags and masked fighters, surfaced on social media.<sup>9</sup>

## The potential for IS to expand in Libya: between AQ and Ansar al-Sharia

In addition to the elected Parliament of Tobruk and, of course, the army of the former General Khalifa Haftar, the anti-Islamist leader supported by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, the IS branch in Libya opposes all those groups of Islamist fighters which do not recognise the authority of al-Baghdadi. Thus the complex relationship between the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> M. Michael, 'Correction: Islamic State-Libya Story', New York Times, 18 February 2015, accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/02/18/world/middleeast/ap-ml-islamic-state-libya.html> on 14 May 2015.

<sup>9</sup> The Maghrebi Note, 'ISIS/IS Enters the Town of Nawfalayah in Sirte District #Libya', 9 February 2015, accessed at <http://themaghrebnote.com/2015/02/09/isis-enters-the-town-of-nawfalayah-in-sirte-district-of-libya/> on 14 May 2015.



IS branch in Libya and the main radical Islamist militia, ASL, is highly controversial. The dividing line between IS and ASL is increasingly seen as fluid.

Both Ansar al-Sharia, responsible for the murder of American Ambassador, Christopher Stevens in 2012, and its various allied militias, especially those with younger members, appear to admire IS. ASL is not just a terrorist group: it also seems to be striving to gain the population's support through *da'wa*, or charitable works, and control of the territory as a replacement for the state, welfare state and Libyan institutions, with the aim of becoming something very similar to Hamas in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Since the 11 September 2012 attack, for example, ASL has shown some openness and willingness to work within the boundaries of the state, trying to distance itself from accusations of being a full member of AQ's network or even being merely a cover name for AQ. Although thousands of people took to the streets in Benghazi after the 11 September attack to demand the removal of the radical militias and show solidarity with the US, it is also true that Islamist militants in Libya are perceived as legitimate actors thanks to the role they played in the revolution. These militias also have an important role in territorial control and the provision of security in the power vacuum created by the collapse of the regime. The GNC named many of them as part of the security forces, even if they were acting and operating quite independently.<sup>10</sup>

Although ASL probably has at least ten thousand core members, less than one thousand of these are fighters.<sup>11</sup> While the group appears to have a primarily local goal—taking power in Libya<sup>12</sup>—it also seems to respond to AQ's call for violent and global jihad, orchestrating attacks against international offices (US and European legations, the headquarters of the Red Cross, etc.), and killing and kidnapping Western citizens. ASL is also involved in shadowy activities aimed at assisting regional jihadists who use Libyan territory as a safe haven for militant training and the smuggling of weapons and fighters.<sup>13</sup> Until now, ASL has refrained from carrying out massive armed jihad in Libya because its members believe that for the time being it has a greater chance of creating an Islamic state by gradually gaining control of state institutions, engaging in social work and establishing a broad-based alliance with other Islamist militias and political parties.<sup>14</sup> However, the military campaign against them (organised by General Haftar) is forcing them into a direct military confrontation.

<sup>10</sup> Torelli and Varvelli, 'New Trends in North African Jihadism'.

<sup>11</sup> Author's interview with Colonel Wolfgang Pusztai (policy and security analyst and former Austrian Defence Attaché to Libya from 2008 to 2012), February 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Jones, 'A Persistent Threat'.

<sup>13</sup> F. Wehrey, 'The Struggle for Security in Eastern Libya', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2012, accessed at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/09/19/struggle-for-security-in-eastern-libya/dvct> on 14 May 2015.

<sup>14</sup> According to analysts, among the most important current ideologues are Sheikh Abu Muhamed al-Maqdisi and Sheikh Abu Mundher al-Shanqiti.



Two of the most important leaders of the Benghazi branch of Ansar al-Sharia were Mohammed Ali al-Zahawi and Ahmed Abu Khattala. The first probably died autumn 2014 in a military clash in Benghazi. The latter, indicted by Washington as a prime suspect in the murder of the US ambassador, was seized in Benghazi by US Special Forces.<sup>15</sup> The leader of the Derna branch is Sufian Bin Qumu, who formerly spent six years in Guantanamo for working with Osama bin Laden. However, in recent months he seems to have disappeared from the scene.

Several indications suggest that alongside its— Hamas or Hezbollah-style—charitable efforts Ansar al-Sharia assists regional jihadist organisations with smuggling weapons and providing safe havens for training. In this sense it appears to be the subject of general criticism regarding violent jihadist strategy (for example, from al-Zarqawi in Iraq), and is alienating the local communities. A group of scholars, led by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, has brought about a number of significant changes to the public's perception of the organisation by trying to strengthen its focus on social activities and *da'wa*.<sup>16</sup>

Al-Zahawi, for example, always denied involvement with AQ and other regional jihadist organisations, and focused on the role the organisation plays in Libya. ASL is trying to expand its activities outside Cyrenaica and is also establishing friendships and alliances with other radical militias in Tripolitania. Its success in doing so is a result of its *da'wa* efforts. The LROR, for example, is one of the most powerful militias in Tripoli. This militia, led by the popular militant Salafist preacher Sheikh Shaban Masoud Hadia, known as Abu Obeida Zawi, considers itself to be a legitimate component of the Libyan state security forces, because it was created by GNC President Abu Sahmein. As part of 'Operation Dawn' LROR maintains a strong relationship with ASL, including fighting alongside it during a November 2013 Libyan Army operation in Benghazi ordered by former Prime Minister Ali Zeidan. Members of LROR seized five Egyptian diplomats in Tripoli in January 2014 in retaliation for the arrest of Sheikh Hadia in Egypt's Alexandria province. Hadia was accused of coordinating with terrorist groups, including AQ, over the ongoing bombings in Cairo.<sup>17</sup>

The case of Abu Khattala is emblematic of the ambiguous goals of the 'new' jihadist group. The US State Department designated him as a terrorist in January 2014, calling him a

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<sup>15</sup> Libya Herald, 'American Special Forces Capture Top Islamist Leader, Ahmed Bukhatallah, in Benghazi Operation', 17 June 2014, accessed at <http://www.libyaherald.com/2014/06/17/american-special-forces-capture-top-ansar-leader-ahmed-bukhatallah-in-benghazi-operation/#ixzz3503liiQd> on 14 May 2015.

<sup>16</sup> D. Cristiani, 'Ansar al-Sharia in Libya: jihadist a geometria variabile', ISPI Commentary, June 2014, accessed at <http://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/ansar-al-sharia-libia-jihadisti-geometria-variabile-10721> on 14 May 2015.

<sup>17</sup> N. A. Heras, 'Sketches of Shaikh Saha'ban Madoud Khalifa Hadia and Uthman Mliqta Rival Libyan Militia Commanders', Militant Leadership Monitor 5/5 (2014), accessed at [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=42458&no\\_cache=1#.VVXE0\\_nHw](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42458&no_cache=1#.VVXE0_nHw) on 15 May 2015.



'senior leader' of the Benghazi branch of the extremist organisation. At the same time Ansar al-Sharia was defined as a terrorist organisation after the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence released its review of the intelligence concerning the terrorist attack in Benghazi. The report confirms that multiple parts of the network have been linked to the attack. According to the report, 'individuals affiliated with terrorist groups, including AQIM, Ansar al Sharia, AQAP, and the Mohammad Jamal Network, participated in the September 11, 2012, attacks'.<sup>18</sup> The committee concluded that there was insufficient intelligence to establish whether or not the leaders of any of these groups had ordered their fighters to take part in the attack.<sup>19</sup>

Despite speculation about the possible role of AQ in leading the attack, Abu Khattala is a local, small-time Islamist militant.<sup>20</sup> He has no verified connections to international terrorist groups according to both American officials briefed on criminal investigation and intelligence reporting and other Benghazi Islamists and militia leaders who have known him for many years. In the several hours of interviews given since the attack, Abu Khattala gladly professed his admiration for Osama bin Laden and other leaders of AQ; nevertheless he has only been able to be a distant admirer of the organisation as a result of having spent most of his life in jail for extremism under the reign of Muammar Qaddafi.<sup>21</sup> In a letter to the UN Security Council, US Ambassador Samantha Power said an investigation had determined that Khattala had continued to plan further armed attacks against Americans.<sup>22</sup>

IS in Libya and elements of ASL have long cooperated with each other, both in the city of Benghazi when fighting against Haftar, and in Derna. Although IS had previously pressurised Ansar al-Sharia elements that were sympathetic to the idea of the 'Islamic State' to join the ranks of IS, at the beginning of 2015 IS demanded this for the first time and it is clear

<sup>18</sup> US Senate, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 'Review of the Terrorist Attacks on U.S. Facilities in Benghazi, Libya, September 11–12, 2012 Together with Additional Views', 15 January 2014, accessed at <http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/benghazi2014/benghazi.pdf> on 15 May 2015.

<sup>19</sup> T. Jocelyn, 'Senate Report: Terrorists "Affiliated" with Multiple al Qaeda Groups Involved in Benghazi Attack', The Long War Journal, 15 January 2014, accessed at [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/01/\\_intelligence\\_on\\_al.php#ixzz36KBax5R1](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/01/_intelligence_on_al.php#ixzz36KBax5R1) on 15 May 2015.

<sup>20</sup> D. D. Kirkpatrick, 'Brazen Figure May Hold Key to Mysteries. Ahmed Abu Khattala Capture May Shed Light on Benghazi Attack', New York Times, 17 June 2014, accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/18/world/middleeast/apprehension-of-ahmed-abu-khattala-may-begin-to-answer-questions-on-assault.html?hpw&rref=world> on 15 May 2015.

<sup>21</sup> M. Fitzgerald, 'A Conversation with Abu Khattala', The New Yorker, 18 June 2014, accessed at <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2014/06/abu-khattala-before-his-capture.html> on 15 May 2015.

<sup>22</sup> M. Nichols, 'US to UN: Benghazi Suspect was Planning More Attacks on Americans', Reuters, 18 June 2014, accessed at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/18/us-usa-politics-benghazi-un-idUSKBN0ET0CU20140618> on 15 May 2015.



that the pressure was growing, especially on those Ansar al-Sharia elements that perhaps did not want to join IS.<sup>23</sup>

ASL has been shown to have a special 'variable geometry':<sup>24</sup> the group has shown flexibility in adjusting and changing its strategy and alliances. However, in the recent past it has declined a more stable relationship with AQ to avoid becoming the Libyan branch of the organisation. Despite this, Libya seems to have hosted members directly related to 'al-Qaeda Central' (AQC) and cells belonging to AQIM.

During and after the 2011 war, AQC dispatched senior operatives to Libya to establish a network of affiliates, gather weapons and establish training camps.<sup>25</sup> AQC issued a number of religious declarations concerning Libya, indicating that their followers should not carry out armed jihad in the country but, if they really felt compelled to take part in an armed struggle, should instead head to Mali or Syria. AQC strategy seems to have focused on two goals: 1) to muster local support through respected Libyan leaders belonging to its inner circle, and 2) to strengthen its links with Salafist groups in order to lay the foundations for an Islamic emirate in Libya.<sup>26</sup>

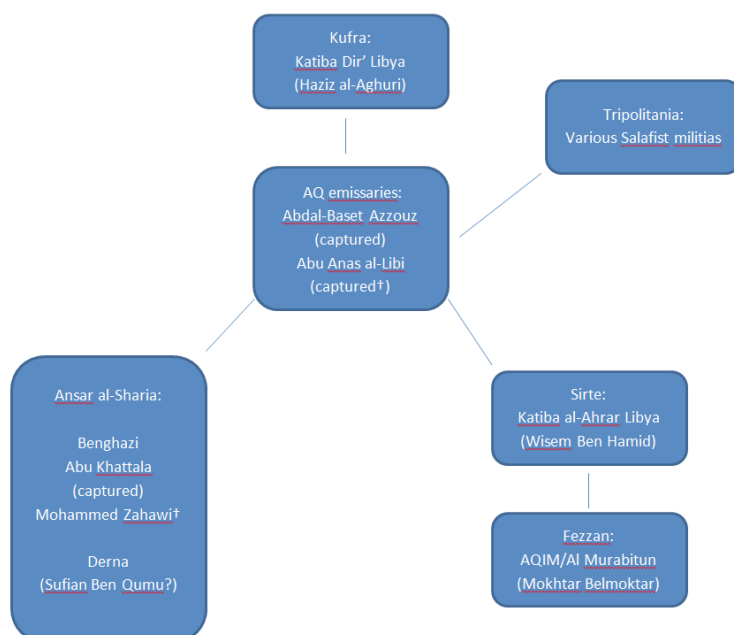


Figure 3: AQ penetration in Libya

Source: US Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, 'Al-Qaeda in Libya', integrated and updated by the author.

<sup>23</sup> A. Engel, Libya's Civil War, 'Rebuilding the Country from the Ground Up', The Washington Institute for Near East Policy no. 25, April 2015, accessed at [http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote25\\_Engel3.pdf](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote25_Engel3.pdf) on 15 May 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Cristiani, 'Ansar al-Sharia in Libya'.

<sup>25</sup> A. Lebovich and A. Y. Zelin, 'Assessing Al-Qa'ida's Presence in Libya', CTC Sentinel 5/3 (2012), pp. 14-18, accessed at [http://mercury.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/141576/ipublicationdocument\\_singledocument/f273ea49-0098-4249-8bdc-7ddfcc15c633/en/CTCSentinel-Vol5Iss3.pdf](http://mercury.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/141576/ipublicationdocument_singledocument/f273ea49-0098-4249-8bdc-7ddfcc15c633/en/CTCSentinel-Vol5Iss3.pdf) on 15 May 2015; N. Robertson and P. Cruickshank, 'Al Qaeda Sent Fighters to Libya', CNN, 30 December 2011, accessed at <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2011/12/30/al-qaeda-sends-fighters-to-libya/>. J. Pack, K. Mezran and M. Eljarh, 'Libya's Faustian Bargains: Braking the Appeasement Cycle', Atlantic Council, Raik Hariri Center for the Middle East, 5 May 2015, accessed at <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/libya-s-faustian-bargains-breaking-the-appeasement-cycle> on 15 May 2015.

<sup>26</sup> US Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, 'Al-Qaeda in Libya: A Profile', August 2012, Washington, DC.



Nonetheless, AQC failed to conquer the loyalty of ASL and the other relevant radical militias, which remain independent and predominantly focused on local goals. Abdel Basset Azouz, who had been detained in Britain on suspicion of terrorism, is said to have been dispatched to Libya in mid-2011. He then began recruiting fighters in the eastern region of the country, near the Egyptian border, succeeding in mobilising more than 200 fighters<sup>27</sup> with the help of Abu Anas al-Libi, a computer engineer tasked with organising and coordinating the leadership with the more pro-AQ Libyan militias.<sup>28</sup> Abu Anas al-Libi was captured in Tripoli on 5 October 2013 by US Army Delta Force operators; Abdel Basset Azouz was arrested in Turkey on 13 November 2014, and later deported to Jordan. These events demonstrate the difficulty that AQ faces in expanding its activities in Libya (see Figure 3).

AQIM's strategy is heavily influenced by its hybrid nature, being a jihadi movement that has solid economic interests in the area. This makes AQIM less prone to focus on armed jihad, especially in its traditional operations bases. Instead, AQIM has exploited the unstable situation in Libya to strengthen its presence in the Fezzan, an area which has acquired increasing importance as a safe haven and a logistical node for trafficking routes. This exploitation has also been helped by the relationships established by the movement with a variety of tribal actors (especially Tuareg) in the Sahelian belt (and especially in northern Mali).<sup>29</sup>

## IS's current strategy in Libya

IS is now trying to penetrate Libya, thanks to its initial control of Derna and the loyalty of a great number of foreign fighters (from Tunisia, Iraq, Yemen, etc.). However, under the name of the Mujahidin Consultative Council, local Islamist militias, including the strong Abu Salim Martyrs' Brigade, are creating a coalition to confront and defeat the Islamic Youth Shura Council (now IS).<sup>30</sup> The Abu Salim Martyrs' Brigade mainly consists of Libyan fighters and was formed during the revolution. Its stance and ideology are very clear: it wants to establish Islamic governance in a Libya ruled by Islamic Law. The Brigade provides and secures fuel supplies, and protects banks from robberies, and is led by the prominent and well-known Salim Derby. The disputes between the groups from a general point of view are, of course, based upon ideological differences: 'local jihad' versus 'global jihad'. The Abu Salim Martyrs' Brigade is a local movement that seeks to establish a local government,

<sup>27</sup> Robertson and Cruickshank, 'Al Qaida Sent Fighters to Libya'.

<sup>28</sup> US Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, 'Al-Qaeda in Libya'.

<sup>29</sup> See the section 'Tunisia, Algeria, Libya: the context and regional connections' (p. 30).

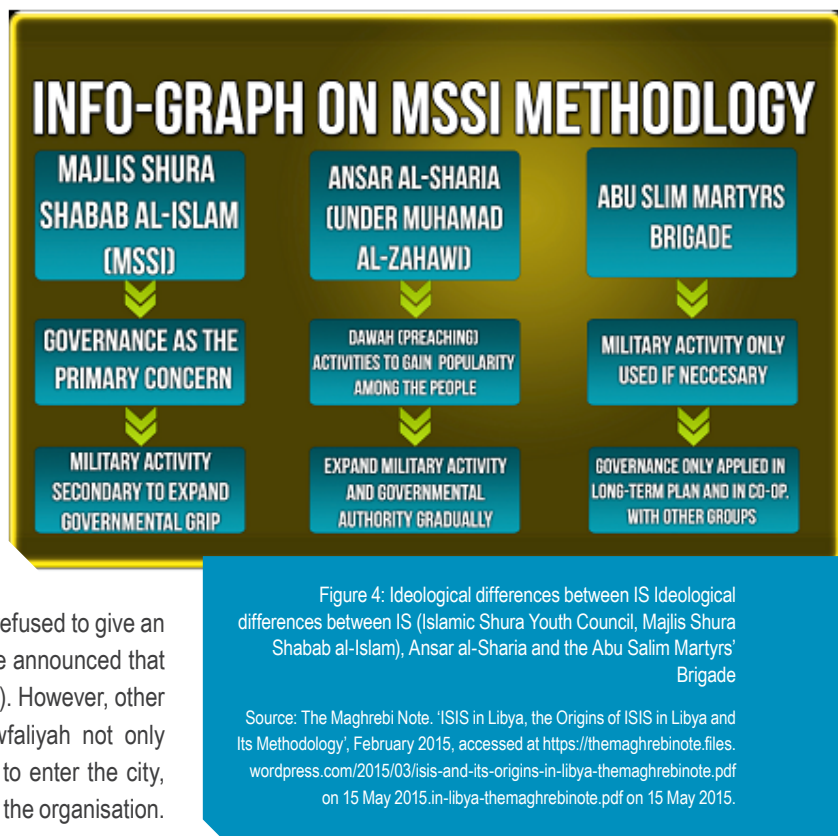
<sup>30</sup> N. Heras, 'Libyan Islamist Militia Leader Salim Barrani Darbi Forms New Coalition in Derna', The Jamestown Foundation (Washington, DC, December 2014), accessed at [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=43227&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=381&cHash=bd474a8d1e337146eb3e49c0286218df#.VL\\_H9SuG-Lg](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43227&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=381&cHash=bd474a8d1e337146eb3e49c0286218df#.VL_H9SuG-Lg) on 15 May 2015.



while the Shura Council of Islamic Youth in Derna is part of a global movement, exogenous to the Libyan tradition.<sup>31</sup> In June 2015, the Islamic State's assassination of Nasir Atiyah al Akar, a prominent al Qaeda-linked jihadist in the Mujahideen Shura Council, a local jihadist alliance formed by Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade, set off a round of fighting. MSC assaulted Islamic State positions throughout the city: a few of the Islamic State's key leaders in Derna have been reportedly killed or captured and, finally, in July IS was driven out of large part of Derna.

There have been several reports from other parts of Libya, for example from the town of Nawfaliyah (near Sirte), that suggest it was former Ansar al-Sharia members who provided the logistical support that enabled the huge convoys of IS members to enter these new areas. In Nawfaliyah IS demanded that the residents of the town pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as had occurred in the city of Derna. According to the well-informed website *The Maghrebi Note*, the initial leader of Ansar al-Sharia in Nawfaliyah, Ghedan Saleh al-Nawfali, reportedly refused to give an oath of allegiance to IS, and has since announced that he has left the group (Ansar al-Sharia). However, other elements of Ansar al-Sharia in Nawfaliyah not only provided the logistical support for IS to enter the city, but also publicly pledged allegiance to the organisation. It is no secret that the main elements of Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte had pledged their allegiance to IS quite some time previously, but this was the first time that disputes had arisen surrounding this issue.<sup>32</sup>

IS, AQ and local jihadists seem to have different aims and there is also growing competition to attract followers, but tactical convergence between them in order to attack specific targets



<sup>31</sup> The Maghrebi Note. 'ISIS in Libya, the Origins of ISIS in Libya and Its Methodology', February 2015, accessed at <https://themaghrebinote.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/isis-and-its-origins-in-libya-themaghrebinote.pdf> on 15 May 2015.

<sup>32</sup> The Maghrebi Note, 'ISIS/IS Enters the Town of Nawfaliyah'.



and achieve specific purposes is increasingly likely. Therefore, even though semi-anarchic Libya has quickly become a safe haven for national and international jihadist groups, the expansion of IS in Libya remains uncertain. However, there is little doubt that IS's plans for Libya—since the Corinthia Hotel attack and the new propaganda based on the video of the Egyptian assassinations—are on a much grander scale than previously thought, and that IS—by sending its emissaries to Libya—is preparing for a new campaign.

According to Aimen Dean, a former jihadist and now a security consultant, IS has commercial agents in Turkey that operate maritime shipping and cargo companies out of ports in the south of the country. The purpose of these companies is to ship expert IS fighters, along with much-needed cash and equipment, into Libyan seaports, especially the small port of Sirte, which is under IS control. Turkish customs officials scrutinise outgoing ships less than those coming into Turkey, especially those coming from Libya. Instead of being a way to smuggle weapons, this suggests that there is increasing cooperation between IS and the human trafficking/people smuggling networks in Turkey and across the Mediterranean, with the aim of moving IS personnel and equipment in the same way that people are being trafficked from the south Mediterranean (especially Libya) to European shores.<sup>33</sup> According to Dean 'the IS seems to increasingly acting as the "IS Inc" in the sense that it is creating an elaborate network of supply routes that blend legal and illegal commercial operations to disguise intentions, destinations, and contents'.<sup>34</sup> Keeping IS's two to four thousand core troops in Libya well financed requires a considerable amount of cash and the safe passage of these funds. Therefore IS has extended its ever-evolving alliance with the people-trafficking networks, with whom it has dealt lucratively for over 18 months to smuggle people into its territories in Syria, into navigating the sea-lanes of the Mediterranean between Libya and Turkey.<sup>35</sup>

According to some reports, the Bahraini national Turki al-Binali (also known as Abu Sufian al-Sulami) was also probably smuggled into Libya from a Turkish seaport in a cargo ship operated by one of IS's shipping companies in Turkey. Al-Binali has become the IS mufti in Libya. The young Bahraini preacher, who has emerged as one of IS's leading extremist ideologues, promotes a version of Islam that has been rejected not only by mainstream religious authorities, but even by veteran jihadi clerics, who are now increasingly out of touch with the new generation of radicals. IS leadership gave him the green light to approach clerics from Libya, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Yemen and elsewhere to try to win them

<sup>33</sup> Five Dimensions Consultants, 'The IS Sea-Lanes of Terror', Newsletter, 26 February 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



over and convince them to settle in IS-controlled areas.<sup>36</sup> Al-Binali visited Sirte to preach in 2013 and did so again at the end of 2014, soon before it fell into the hands of the group's supporters.<sup>37</sup>

The aim of this strategy was to recruit influential people into the local jihadist network. According to an audio message released by IS, the first success was the defection of Abu Abdullah al-Libi from Ansar al-Sharia. In April, al-Libi—who was Ansar al-Sharia's Shari'i (or judge)—confirmed his departure from the Libyan jihadi group when he tweeted a picture of a book entitled *The Legal Validity of Pledging Allegiance to the Islamic State*, along with the caption 'Soon, God willing'. In an audio message released on IS-controlled radio in Sirte, IS accepted al-Libi's pledge of allegiance to the group's caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>38</sup>

Various analysts have noted that since the death of Ansar al-Sharia's pro-AQ leader Mohamed al-Zahawi in clashes last year, the group has shown signs of moving closer to the tactics of IS.<sup>39</sup> Al-Zahawi was opposed to building state institutions, but following his death the group has started to do so, mirroring a tactic also employed by IS. A pledge of allegiance from Ansar al-Sharia to IS would forge the biggest jihadi group in the country.

The background to the possible rise of IS in Libya is quite similar to that of its rise in Iraq. The Iraqi government under Nouri al-Maliki marginalised large segments of the Sunni Iraqi population, which caused many Sunni tribes to initially consider IS as the lesser of two evils compared to what they deemed to be a corrupt and weak Iraqi government. In this context, the mounting sectarian strife in Iraq has created favourable conditions for the noticeable return of sectarian violence in the already divided Iraqi society. Although Libya is not characterised by the same sectarianism, it is no coincidence that IS has expanded its activities in Sirte, the native city of Muammar Qaddafi. On the beach of Sirte, IS beheaded 21 Egyptian Christians, as seen in the video circulated on the Internet in mid-February. Since his fall, the Qaddafi tribe has been marginalised and ostracised by the GNC and Tripoli government. There is a consensus emerging that IS is attracting members from ASL and from the segments of the population that have been marginalised in the 'new' Libya. However, as evident in the case of Derna, some local armed factions and jihadists regard Islamic State as an infiltrator and competitor.

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<sup>36</sup> New York Post, 'The Millennial ISIS Preacher Radicalizing the Next Generation of Jihadis', 28 January 2015, accessed at <http://nypost.com/2015/01/28/meet-isis-30-year-old-preacher-of-bloody-rampages/> on 15 May 2015.

<sup>37</sup> M. Michael, 'Correction: Islamic State-Libya Story'.

<sup>38</sup> J. Moore, 'Spiritual Leader of Libya's Biggest Jihadi Group Pledges Allegiance to ISIS', *Newsweek*, 8 April 2015, accessed at <http://www.newsweek.com/top-judge-libyas-biggest-jihadi-group-pledges-allegiance-isis-320408> on 15 May 2015.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, M. Horowitz, senior analyst at the geopolitical risk consultancy Max Security Solutions, quoted in Moore, 'Spiritual Leader'.



In August 2015 tribal fighting in Sirte began after the Islamic State branch assassinated a prominent imam, Khalid bin Rajab Ferjani, who was from the local al-Farjan tribe, a substantial force in many of Libya's central coastal cities. Although the al-Farjan tribe has traditionally been strongly represented in the region's Sufi orders, the assassination came after local Salafists and al-Farjan tribesmen had refused to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State.

Usama al Karrami, Libyan head of the Islamic State in the area of Sirte, a relative and part of the clan of Ismail Karrami, head of the anti-drug agency during the Gaddafi regime and a Gaddafi's militia leader during the revolution. This seems to be a confirmation of the fact that some supporters of the Colonel were recycled into the Islamic State. He appears in some video-propaganda of the Islamic State in Libya: preaching to the crowd in Derna in December 2014<sup>40</sup>; patrolling the market of Sirte; speaking at a public meeting in which 40 officers of the Interior Ministry ask forgiveness in return for their lives.<sup>41</sup>

## Tunisia: the danger of infiltration to or from Libya

Tunisia has witnessed the gradual rise of jihadi Salafism since 2011. Internal and external factors have contributed to this: internally, the inability of transient governments to solve the socio-economic problems and the marginalisation of a large part of society from the transition process; externally, the crisis on its borders, from Mali, to Algeria and Libya. This has led to a situation of regional instability. Such instability is likely to jeopardise the transition process in Tunisia and is characterised by extra-territorial and cross-border dynamics which make it necessary to analyse the phenomenon from a regional point of view, rather than just focusing on a specific national context within North Africa.

Among the external factors is the fact that Tunisia borders Algeria and Libya. The instability in Libya and the emergence of jihadist groups in this context are two factors that have significantly contributed to the spread of jihadist groups in Tunisia. This particularly seems to have been the case since the escape of AST leader Abu 'Ayyadh to Libya after the attack against the US embassy in September 2012<sup>42</sup> (the first occasion on which Salafists were confronted by Tunisian security forces, when 4 militants were killed), and even more so since AST was declared a terrorist organisation by the Tunisian authorities in August 2013.

<sup>40</sup> See the video at [https://archive.org/details/Moltaqa\\_1](https://archive.org/details/Moltaqa_1), accessed on 31 August 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Daniele Raineri, "La catena di comando dello Stato islamico in Libia", Il Foglio, 19 March 2015, accessed at [http://www.ilfoglio.it/esteri/2015/03/19/libia-la-catena-di-comando-dello-stato-islamico\\_\\_\\_1-v-126821-rubriche\\_c329.htm](http://www.ilfoglio.it/esteri/2015/03/19/libia-la-catena-di-comando-dello-stato-islamico___1-v-126821-rubriche_c329.htm), on 31 August 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Abu 'Ayyadh was killed in an US airstrike in Libya on June 2015. See also "Abou Yadh tué lors du raid américain en Libye", Mosaiquefm, accessed at <http://www.mosaiquefm.net/fr/index/a/ActuDetail/Element/54330-abou-yadh-tue-lors-du-raid-americain-en-libye>.



This declaration resulted in a dispersion of the group, whose members, because of the repression suffered in Tunisia, found refuge in Libya, establishing new connections with local Salafi jihadist groups, initially ASL (although there is no evidence that the two groups had a common origin).<sup>43</sup> Moreover, many Tunisians who are fighting in Iraq and Syria within the ranks of IS use Libya as a base. Connections between Tunisian and Libyan jihadists are increasingly evident: Abu Ibrahim al-Tunsi, one of the attackers of the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli, was a Tunisian. In March 2015, one of the most wanted Tunisian jihadists, Ahmed Rouissi, was killed in Sirte, where he was fighting alongside local jihadist groups.

As well as going to fight in Iraq and Syria, hundreds of Tunisians are also counted as foreign fighters in neighbouring Libya, as full advantage is taken of the porousness of the borders. Despite the main crossing points having been closed by the Tunisian authorities on several occasions for security reasons, it is clear that it is quite easy for fighters and weapons to pass across the Libyan–Tunisian border.<sup>44</sup> The two Tunisian perpetrators of the Bardo attack, Yassine Abidi and Saber Khachnaoui, had travelled to Libya in December 2014 to get the weapons and training needed to carry out the attack in Tunis. Similarly Seifeddine Rezgui Yacoubi, the perpetrator of the attack against the foreign tourists at the tourist resort at Port El Kantaoui (near Sousse) on 26 June 2015, has been trained in Libya as well. According to Tunisian security sources there are at least two training camps in Libya, in Benghazi and Derna, that are used by Tunisian jihadists, and this has been confirmed by the Tunisian jihadist Abu Bakr al-Hakim (also known as Abu Muqatil al-Tunisi) in an interview for the IS propaganda journal, *Dabiq*.<sup>45</sup> In the interview, the Tunisian jihadist, now in Iraq, states that the jihadist groups in Libya played an important role in helping Tunisian militants to carry out their attacks in Tunisia, by training them and providing them with weapons. Derna is probably the city where Abu ‘Ayyadh, took refuge before he was killed. Despite it initially appearing that Abu ‘Ayyadh had abandoned jihad in order to follow the concept of *da’wa*, after moving to Libya he seemed to have re-radicalised. It is worth nothing that ‘Ayyadh has been one of only a few in the regional Salafi jihadist network to have appealed for unity between AQIM and IS by inviting AQIM leader ‘Abd al-Malik Droukdel to join forces with the self-declared Caliphate of al-Baghdadi in order to fight the governments of Algeria and Tunisia.<sup>46</sup> Although currently AST militants in Libya number just

<sup>43</sup> See also S. M. Torelli, ‘Tunisian Jihadists Establishing New Networks with Libyan Islamists’, *Terrorism Monitor* 12/11 (2014), pp. 5–6.

<sup>44</sup> See M. Kartas, ‘On the Edge? Trafficking and Insecurity at the Tunisian–Libyan Border’, Working Paper no. 17, Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (Geneva, 2013).

<sup>45</sup> Dabiq, ‘Interview with Abu Muqatil’, no. 8, March 2015, 59–62.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, ANSAMED.com, ‘ISIS: Tunisian Jihad Asks AQMI to Merge with Islamic State’, 6 October 2014 accessed at [http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/sections/generalnews/2014/10/06/isistunisian-jihad-asks-aqmi-to-merge-with-islamic-state\\_8eb97ecd-76dc-4f6f-a2d5-73b1ec6b46a8.html](http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/sections/generalnews/2014/10/06/isistunisian-jihad-asks-aqmi-to-merge-with-islamic-state_8eb97ecd-76dc-4f6f-a2d5-73b1ec6b46a8.html) on 15 May 2015.



a few hundred, such an appeal aims to gain more strength and influence in the region for the organisation, by overcoming internal disputes and making the jihadist struggle more effective. In this context, Libya appears to be the new base of operations for jihadist cells that aim to destabilise North Africa, and Tunisia in particular. For this reason, the security of Libya has also assumed even more importance in ensuring balance in the entire Southern Mediterranean region.

## Tunisia, Algeria, Libya: the context and regional connections

The largest jihadist organisation in all North Africa, AQIM, comes from Algeria. It is currently redefining its tactical objectives. Furthermore, at its eastern borders the Libyan conflict has provoked the emergence of new jihadist groups which declared their allegiance to IS in 2014. According to some sources, after the Tunisian authorities declared AST a terrorist organisation, many of its members went to Libya to join ASL. Moreover, the lack of security on the Tunisian borders with both Algeria and Libya facilitates infiltration.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the borders are highly porous, and it is not unusual for criminal activities to develop as a result. This phenomenon itself is not new to the Tunisian authorities, but a new element is the link between local criminal activities (black market transactions and the smuggling of weapons and drugs) and the interests of jihadist groups. Further complicating the picture is the institutional and security crisis that has affected Mali since 2012 (which, in turn, is linked to the crisis that erupted in Libya). The instability in Mali has contributed to a partial reorganisation of AQIM along the southern vector and subsequently to the redistribution of some cells to the north, in Tunisia. All of these factors suggest that the general instability in the North Africa and Sahel region has had repercussions for Tunisia, a country that apparently is the only one that continues to carry out a linear process of political transition.

However, at the same time, the very fact that Tunisia currently represents the only case of successful transition out of all the contexts directly or indirectly affected by the Arab Spring means that radical forces see the Tunisian government and institutions as the enemy. This is especially true in light of the fact that one of the protagonists of the current political phase in Tunisia, the Renaissance Party (Ennahda), is an Islamist political party: thus it threatens to overshadow the other Islamist movements. Therefore, Tunisia is at the centre of a context which, in part, is contributing to the creation and expansion of radical groups and it is no coincidence that these movements have emerged with greater force in the last three years, in conjunction with the outbreak of a new security crisis at the country's borders. This confirms the thesis that radical movements find the ideal conditions to act in precisely

<sup>47</sup> See also International Crisis Group, 'Tunisia's Borders: Jihadism and Contraband', Middle East and North Africa Report no. 148 (Brussels, 28 November 2013).



those contexts where security is lower and consequently the authorities' control is not as effective as normal.

In the Tunisian case, a structural factor that concerns the organisation of the national army is added. While Algeria has a long tradition of anti-terrorist forces as it has faced this threat since the 1990s and, over time, has adopted the instruments and expertise suited to cope with jihadist movements, Tunisia has never had such a consistent threat within its borders.<sup>48</sup> This was the cause of one of the main problems faced by the Tunisian security forces during the first phase of jihadist attacks in the spring of 2013 in the territory of the Jebel Chaambi: a lack of adequate tools to operate in this kind of territory against terrorist actors. It was particularly noticeable that the Tunisian army was equipped neither with combat helicopters to patrol the area and flush out the militants, nor with land vehicles suitable for the mountainous territory in that area. All these features highlight the difficulties of acting at the borders and in rural areas: throughout the Ben Ali era the training of the security forces reflected that of the urban police, who were trained to repress forms of internal dissent in urban centres and were not accustomed to dealing with non-state actors using guerrilla tactics. Moreover, even now, it is hard to tell exactly how many jihadist groups are operating in Tunisia, what their composition is and with which groups they have regional ties. It is equally difficult to understand their relationship with AST, which according to some sources has been partially reconstituted in Libya. The next section tries to shed some light on the nature of the jihadist groups operating in Tunisia, outlining some of their features and modes of action.

## Beyond AQIM: the evolution of jihadism in Tunisia

The first episodes of armed struggle in 2013 occurred in the area of the Jebel Chaambi. As mentioned above, several factors have made it clear that the perpetrators of these attacks were elements linked to Algerian jihadism. In particular, over time it has become clear that AQIM was trying to expand its presence in Tunisia. Therefore, these struggles were not necessarily linked to the activities of AST, although the Tunisian security sources did try to link home-grown Salafist groups with the new jihadist guerrilla movements that had appeared in the country. The attack of 29 July 2013, in which eight soldiers were killed, made it clear that the tactics used by the militants in the Jebel Chaambi were Algerian-inspired and matched the *modus operandi* of AQIM: the commando units consisting of dozens of militants divided into small cells of three or four fighters; the ambush of Tunisian army patrols; and the subsequent killing of the soldiers and theft not only of their weapons, but also their military uniforms, were all tactics used by Algerian jihadist groups during the civil

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<sup>48</sup> See S. M. Torelli, 'Meeting the Jihad Challenge in Tunisia: The Military and Political Response', *Terrorism Monitor* 11/17 (2013), 5–7.



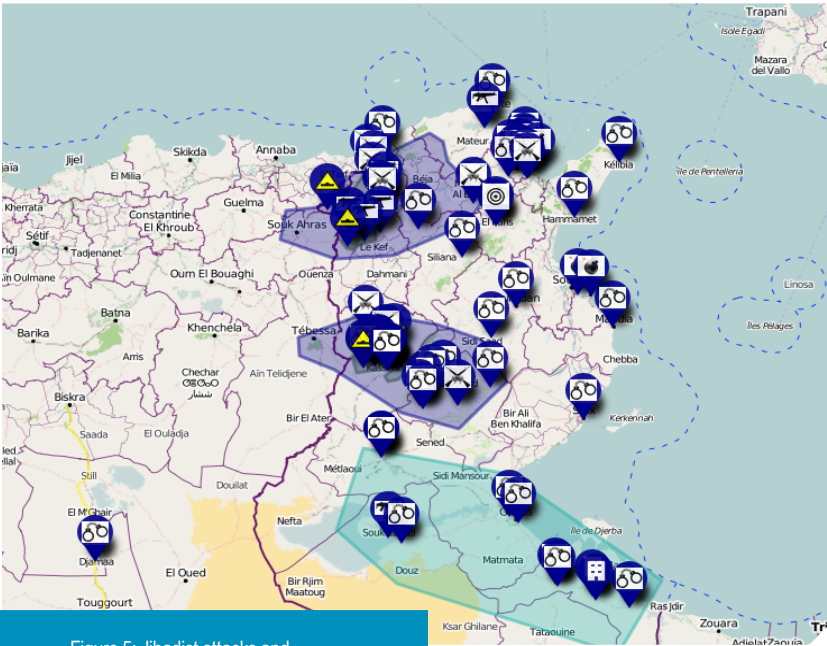


Figure 5: Jihadist attacks and counterterrorist operations in Tunisia since 2013

Source: Mejri, 'Terrorisme en Tunisie'.

war of the 1990s. Moreover, with the intensification of counterterrorism operations by the Tunisian security forces—and, later, in cooperation with the Algerian forces in order to cover both sides of the border—the links between groups operating in Tunisia and AQIM clearly emerged. Indeed, many of the jihadists killed or arrested were Algerian nationals, as Algerian intelligence was able to inform the Tunisian authorities of infiltration attempts by Algerian militants within Tunisia. Therefore, in this first stage, the phenomenon of Tunisian jihadism, unlike other forms of Salafism (with particular reference

to AST), seems to have been imported, and operations were directed by both Algerians and Tunisians. At this point, it is difficult to determine whether and to what extent AST colluded in the emergence of jihadism in Tunisia. Initially, AST leader Abu 'Ayyadh repeatedly declared that Tunisia represented a land of prayer, rather than of jihad. However, it is possible that some former members of AST had joined the jihadist cells operating in the Jebel Chaambi, especially after the Tunisian Salafist movement was declared a terrorist organisation by the authorities in August 2013.<sup>49</sup> From a tactical point of view, the changes began in the summer of 2013: the suicide attack against a tourist resort in Sousse<sup>50</sup> and the foiled attack against the mausoleum of Bourguiba in Monastir marked a shift from institutional targets in rural and peripheral areas to those in urban centres. These elements suggest that Tunisian nationals had been radicalised enough to adopt jihadist tactics. Moreover, since then, hundreds of young Tunisians have left Tunisia to join the militia of IS in the self-declared Caliphate in Syria and Iraq led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

<sup>49</sup> It is important to make a distinction between the radicalisation of a group and the radicalisation of individuals. In the case of AST, it seems that individual radicalisation of some members occurred, rather than the radicalisation towards jihad of the entire organisation. After AST was declared a terrorist organisation, some members simply ceased their activity.

<sup>50</sup> The attack occurred on 30 October 2013 and only the perpetrator, a Tunisian, died in it. This was the first suicide attack in Tunisia since the 2002 Djerba bombing and it was also the first time that the target had been linked to the tourism industry and potentially to Western citizens.



The fact that an increasing number of Tunisians have become radicalised and have adopted a jihadist strategy has represented a significant opportunity for jihadist cells in the area of the Jebel Chaambi to expand their actions and to build a network able to reach other areas of the country. The city of Kasserine, the closest urban centre to the Jebel Chaambi, has become a sort of logistical base for Tunisian jihadist groups. It is no coincidence that the only attack publicly claimed by AQIM occurred in this city, against the home of former Interior Minister Lotfi Ben Jeddou, killing four policemen.

Furthermore, the 'Uqba ibn Nafi' Brigade, the local jihadist movement linked to AQIM, has gradually expanded to have many small sleeper cells spread throughout the country, leading to a diversification of the attacks, arrests and raids carried out by the security forces, which have affected increasingly larger areas, including the capital, Tunis.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the identification of the 'Uqba ibn Nafi' Brigade as responsible for the terrorist incidents that have occurred in Tunisia since the fall of Ben 'Ali dates back to December 2012, when the Tunisian authorities revealed that they had discovered the existence of such a cell at the border with Algeria. However, it was only after several months that its nature became clearer: the 'Uqba ibn Nafi' Brigade, led by an Algerian jihadist known as Lokman Abu Sakhr, has direct links to AQIM. The fundamental difference between the activities of AST between 2011 and 2012 and the ones of the 'Uqba ibn Nafi' Brigade since 2013 lies in the decision to depart from the social landscape, thus becoming an underground group using classic guerrilla tactics, but apparently without local support or connivance. AST—although a radical Salafist and anti-systemic movement—has always had representatives within certain social groups. In this way, Abu 'Ayyadh's group has acted openly, seeking support from the population and often devoting time to social activities, such as preaching and support of those in need and the poor, even in the remotest areas of the country. In contrast, the jihadist cells that emerged in 2013 deliberately chose to isolate themselves, to conduct their battle against the Tunisian institutions and authorities covertly, and to take refuge in the mountainous areas of the Jebel Chaambi.<sup>52</sup> This is not only a change in tactics, but also in strategy, since their ultimate aim seems to be the destabilisation of the political transition process, rather than the Islamisation of society from below.

A much-debated issue is the renewal, even in Tunisia, of the internal division within jihadism that has developed between AQ and IS, especially since the establishment of the so-called

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<sup>51</sup> Since the end of 2013, attacks and counterterrorism operations have proliferated in regions such as Menzel Bourguiba, Sidi Ali Ben Aoun, Medenine, Ennasim, Jendouba, Fernana, Oued Ellil, Kef, Ben Gerdane, Gabes, Mahdia, Kairouan and Bizerte, as well as in other areas, both urban and remote. On 27 July 2013 a car bomb detonated at La Goulette, Tunis. See also W. Mejri, 'Terrorisme en Tunisie. Carte interactive des événements après le 14 janvier', Inkyfada.com, 14 June 2014, accessed at <https://inkyfada.com/maps/carte-du-terrorisme-en-tunisie-depuis-la-revolution/> on 15 May 2015.

<sup>52</sup> See also H. Malka, 'Tunisia: Confronting Extremism', in J. B. Alterman (ed.), *Religious Radicalism after the Arab Uprisings* (Washington, DC: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2015).



Caliphate by the latter. Although it has been shown that the 'Uqba ibn Nafi' Brigade was born as a 'Tunisian branch' of AQIM, according to some sources it almost swore allegiance to the 'Caliph' Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in September 2014, foreshadowing a rupture with AQIM, or at least a division within 'Uqba ibn Nafi' itself.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, in a video posted on the Internet in December 2014, Abu Bakr al-Hakim, a well-known Tunisian jihadist currently in Iraq in the ranks of IS, was the first to claim responsibility for the killing of the two Tunisian politicians assassinated in 2013 (Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi) and called for jihad against Tunisia. This appeal, fully reflecting the takfirist nature of IS, appeared to confirm that, even among Tunisian jihadists, IS ideology has been taking root.

In addition, the attack against the Bardo Museum in Tunis on 18 March 2015 and at the resort near Sousse on 26 June 2015 appear to follow the strategy of IS and its affiliates, rather than that of AQ. The choice of target (the indiscriminate killing of Western tourists instead of military or institutional targets; the capital, Tunis, and not a peripheral zone; and a strike at the heart of the Tunisian economy by targeting the tourism industry) seemed to reflect the strategies of IS and distanced the attack from the episodes of jihadist guerrilla warfare that had occurred in the Jebel Chaambi.<sup>54</sup> The attack was conducted by two Tunisian nationals; it is still not entirely clear who was responsible for organising it. The authorities believe that the 'Uqba ibn Nafi' Brigade was responsible and its facilities have been the focus of the Tunisian security forces' investigation. On 29 March 2015, during a military operation in Gafsa, security forces killed nine jihadists, including the head of the organisation, Lokman Abu Sakhr. In a statement confirming the death of its leader, the 'Uqba ibn Nafi' Brigade was subtitled 'AQIM in Tunisia', implying that it is still linked to the qaedist Algerian movement rather than to IS. At the same time, another jihadist group, Jund al-Khilafa in Tunisia, which claims to be affiliated to IS, has claimed responsibility for the Bardo attack. Given its name, it would appear to be the Tunisian branch of the jihadist group Jund al-Khilafa, which formed in Algeria in 2014. The latter has split from AQIM and declared its loyalty to IS. It was responsible for the kidnapping and beheading of the French tour guide Hervé Gourdel. As reported by the jihadist website *Ifriqiyya Media*, the Tunisian jihadist network is very complex and consists of four main groups: in addition to the important and well organised 'Uqba ibn Nafi' Brigade and Jund al-Khilafa in Tunisia, there are two other smaller, silent cells in operation. They are Tawhid wa al-Jihad in the African Lands,

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Al-Arabiya.net, 'Al-Qaeda Tunisia Offshoot Offers Backing to ISIS', 20 September 2014, accessed at <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/09/20/Al-Qaeda-Tunisia-offshoot-offers-backing-to-ISIS.html> on 15 May 2015.

<sup>54</sup> For more on this, see F. Merone, 'Further Notes on the Evolution of the Jihadi International Movement', Open Democracy, 6 April 2015, accessed at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/fabio-merone/further-notes-on-evolution-of-jihadi-international-movement> on 15 May 2015.



which is seemingly independent, and The Vanguard of Jund al-Khilafa, which, according to *Ifriqiyya Media*, is a small but professional group, responsible for the Bardo attack.

## Conclusion

The chaotic situation in Libya is characterised by the existence of a plurality of legitimacies: one which is derived from the revolution (militia groups), another that is connected with the electoral results (the secular bloc) and still another linked to religion (Islamist groups). There is no doubt that the worsening situation is partially due to the activities of the Islamist groups and their declaration in favour of violence: members of Salafist and Islamist movements (even from within the GNC) are sponsoring violence against intellectuals, journalists and judges, and are contributing to the deterioration of the security situation in the country and the rise of IS. Libya has quickly become a safe haven for jihadist groups, including those from Tunisia.

Currently, attempts are being made to introduce an exogenous radical vision of Islam into Libya. This is due to, first, the presence of returnee jihadists (and foreign fighters). But it is also due to the financial and theological support of private donors from Arab Gulf monarchies, which generally follow the Hanbali school of law, closely associated with Wahabism. In Libya, where the more moderate Maliki school of Islamic law is historically predominant, there is popular hostility to Wahabism.

A wide variety of groups fall under the label of jihadist movements and organisations. They are united by their adherence to armed jihad, which, due to its defensive nature, is considered a religious duty of every able-bodied believer. Apart from this common factor, these organisations present extremely diverse scopes and objectives. Some perceive the “holy” struggle as a means of conquering the authorities in Libya, a struggle that has to be waged against enemies both internal (secular/liberal opponents) and external. Others tend to place this fight in a broader perspective, adhering partially or completely to the global jihadi doctrine that aims to re-establish the Islamic caliphate. Jihadist groups, especially IS, are benefiting from this situation and increasing their activities, either in terms of anti-Western and secularist attacks, or in the valuable field of illicit trafficking and smuggling.

In September 2014, with the aim of helping the first Libyan returnee jihadists from the al-Battar Brigade, al-Baghdadi organised the takeover of Derna by dispatching one of his senior aides and creating an enclave of IS in Sirte. The expansion of IS in Libya will be determined by the degree of instability in the country. The best way to contain IS in Libya would be to form a new, re-legitimised government, able to fight the jihadists.

If an international coalition were to intervene in Libya prior to the formation of a national unity government, it would make it easier for various Islamist militias to converge and to



become more radicalised. So far IS has been somewhat in competition with Ansar al-Sharia and other jihadist groups, but external military intervention would make it easy for them to become allies. If the international community decided to implement airstrikes, a clear distinction would have to be made between terrorists and other Islamist groups. The international community would need to understand clearly that while the former were possible targets, the others were to be protected and perhaps encouraged to participate in political dialogue under the aegis of the international community.

Using Libya as a strategic hub, the Arab Maghreb represents a basic building block for IS's expansion on a global scale. The emergence of new IS-inspired groups could reshape the strategic alliance existing in the region between AQIM and IS, but it could also offer fertile ground for terrorism and a radical shift in the terrorist organisation landscape operating in North Africa and the Sahel. These factors partially explain the decision of Tunisian and Algerian jihadist groups to announce their allegiance to al-Baghdadi and to reshape their strategy to match that of IS.

In Tunisia the transition from a quietist type of Salafism to a more 'activist' and jihadist one occurred between 2012 and 2013 and was marked by the appearance of a new jihadist group, the 'Uqba ibn Nafi' Brigade. Prior to this, AST was characterised by an ideology that promoted the use of jihad abroad, but saw Tunisia as a land of prayer and not of fighting. Consequently, although as a group its goals were somewhat ambiguous, its tactics focused on *da'wa* and social action. The attack against the US embassy in Tunis signalled the beginning of the transition from a predominantly quietist attitude to a more militant one. It was marked by two new factors: first, the choice of a Western target; second, a direct confrontation with the Tunisian institutional forces. However, it is still difficult to determine precisely whether this episode represented a new tactical line or was simply a spontaneous event. In any case, the escalation in the confrontation between AST and the Tunisian government produced another effect, the progressive repression of Salafists by the state. From this point on, the Tunisian government began to systematically link AST with the violence that had become increasingly frequent in the country, although there was no clear evidence for this connection. At the same time, in the spring of 2013, Tunisia began to experience the first episodes of jihadist violence, in the mountainous area of the Jebel Chaambi at the border between Tunisia and Algeria. The jihadist groups operating in the Jebel Chaambi seem to have roots in Algeria rather than Tunisia. Several considerations substantiate this claim. First of all, Algerian intelligence repeatedly warned the Tunisian security services about attempted infiltration by Algerian jihadists into Tunisian territory. Moreover, many of the arrests made by the Tunisian authorities confirmed the presence of Algerian nationals in the areas where jihadist groups were active in Tunisia. Furthermore, the *modus operandi* of the attacks conducted against the Tunisian security forces since 2013 has been very



similar to those used by the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat in Algeria during the years of civil war.

Alongside these early forms of jihadism directed externally, there is evidence that many young Tunisians have been gradually radicalising. This radicalisation has had two divergent effects. While hundreds of Tunisians have left Tunisia and joined the IS militia in Iraq and Syria, others have preferred to stay in Tunisia to fight the jihad at home, remaining with the jihadist networks already present in the territory. This phenomenon of radicalisation can be explained in two ways. First, there is the process of 'political' radicalisation: many young Tunisians radicalise and come into contact with other jihadists as a reaction to being excluded from the process of political transition, or to the repression by the state authorities. Second, what has been called a process of 'socio-economic' radicalisation has emerged. This theory assumes that there are direct connections between the difficult economic and social conditions in which most Tunisians live and their radicalisation. Not surprisingly, the areas most affected by the phenomenon of conversion to jihadism are those that are less developed. They are located in the south and west (consider the case of Kasserine, which has become the new hotbed for jihadism in Tunisia), and the peripheries of urban centres, especially the poor neighbourhoods of the capital, Tunis.





# ESSAY

# POLITICS



2

ESSAY 2

**POLITICAL PARTY  
OR ARMED  
FACTION?**





## ESSAY 2

# POLITICAL PARTY OR ARMED FACTION?

## The future of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood

Valentina Colombo, Giuseppe Dentice and Arturo Varvelli



The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) seems weaker in Libya than in other Arab states, which can be attributed to Libyan peculiarities. The Brotherhood's traditional welfare activities—a key factor in the success of the movement—have had limited importance there, as the Gaddafi regime previously distributed allowances and benefits to the population. Without the social pivot of patronage and welfare activities, Libya's MB places more emphasis on the ideological and doctrinal narrative, narrowing its audience and constituency. However, the evolution of political and ideological trends within the Libyan MB makes little sense without a deeper understanding of the influences and repercussions that regional events have had on the country. The most relevant factors include the civil/sectarian confrontation in the Middle East; the ousting of President Mohammed Morsi in Egypt, with the consequent military repression against the Egyptian MB (which has a clear influence over the Libyan branch); and the tensions in Tunisia and the Sahel.

After the fall of Gaddafi, the Libyan MB agreed to join a legitimate system, distancing itself from the more extreme jihadi actors, who have not renounced violence. In its attempt to reassert internal control, the MB has aimed to strengthen links with society and foster credibility at the international level. Especially since the fall of Morsi and the rise of General Khalifa Haftar as an anti-Islamist crusader in Benghazi, the MB has adopted a more moderate agenda, engaging in dialogue with traditional and former jihadi Salafi groups.

This article evaluates the influence of regional and local factors, including the diverse ideological, political, economic, social and historical contexts of the MB's presence in Libya. Furthermore, it analyses the Libyan MB's attitude towards terrorist groups, democratic processes and the reconciliation talks envisaged by the UN. Finally, it draws conclusions about the potential of the MB and its military affiliates vis-à-vis gaining and maintaining strength in the country.



## A challenging definition

Since the second half of the twentieth century, definitions such as ‘Islamic fundamentalism’, ‘radicalism’, ‘Islamic activism or revival’, ‘jihadism’ and ‘political Islam’ have increasingly crowded the academic literature. They have become common labels to identify an extremely complex and nuanced variety of movements emerging inside the Islamic community. These movements, although presenting different agendas, *modi operandi*, ideologies and scope, share the common goal of making Islam once again the driving (and regulating) force of the *umma* (the community of the believers). Their ultimate objective is to re-Islamise society, to free dar al-Islam (i.e., the house of Islam, the territories where Islam is traditionally professed) from its bonds and to mark the beginning of a new golden age. Notwithstanding this common narrative, the differences marking these movements run deep and this complicates the task of establishing a univocal vocabulary to include all existing realities.

From a semantic point of view, the proliferation of ‘labels’ is quite recent. In the first half of the twentieth century, terms such as ‘Islam’ and ‘Islamism’ were relatively interchangeable. This led to the adoption of several generic labels, which tried to capture a diverse, ever-changing reality in fixed—but, all the same, confused—definitions. By considering how the call for a ‘return to traditional Islam’ translates into the original form of the ‘return’ of Islam in the socio-political realm, we can identify three main *modi operandi*, with specific characteristics:<sup>55</sup>

- **Political Islamism** aims to lay the foundations of an Islamic society through direct participation in the political arena. It is exemplified by the political parties in the Arab world connected to the doctrine of the Ikhwan al-Muslimun, or the Muslim Brotherhood.
- **Missionary Islamism** is based on the concept of *dawa* (preaching of Islam) and social assistance. This approach seeks to Islamise (or re-Islamise) society, focusing on religion and primary needs, through Islamic preaching and an Islamic welfare network assisting those in need. With all of their differences, Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt, the al-Sadr network in Iraq and Ansar al-Sharia in Libya have all adopted this approach.
- **Jihadist Islamism** has as its main purpose to respond to the call of the populations living in the parts of the dar al-Islam which are (or are perceived to be) under

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<sup>55</sup> International Crisis Group, Understanding Islamism, Middle East/North Africa Report no. 372 (2 March 2005), accessed at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/037-understanding-islamism.aspx> on 22 May 2015.



attack by external (foreign armies of non-believers) and/or internal (apostate) actors through an armed jihad. As discussed in the following sections, this *modus operandi* encompasses a number of extremely diversified movements with diverging, if not fully opposed, agendas, strategies and ideologies.

Furthermore, from a wider but fundamental point of view, a crucial classification of different Islamic movements follows two basic dichotomies: violent/non-violent militancy and local/transnational attitudes.

All academic interpretations—although essential to comprehending the complexity of such extremely diverse phenomena—remain merely theoretical distinctions and fall short of fully capturing a reality presenting more osmotic and articulated dynamics. The MB exemplifies this issue. While the movement rejects the use of violence to attain its objectives, it has engaged in armed struggles with Egyptian authorities (as in the case of the assassination of the Egyptian prime minister in 1948). Similarly, one of its main intellectuals, Sayyid Qutb, is widely celebrated as the 'ideological' father of more extreme radical movements. At the same time, while the MB is actively involved in the political realm, it has not renounced missionary Islamism and *da'wa*.

## Plural legitimacies and the Libyan MB

Libya's most recent crisis has deep roots and distant origins, ranging from a weak national Libyan identity to legacies from the civil war of 2011, which did not end with the fall of the Gaddafi regime and the killing of Colonel Gaddafi.<sup>56</sup> A key element in better understanding the dynamics of the African country's present divisions is the concept of legitimacy. All forces at play naturally try to impose themselves as the only legitimate actor in the country, and all claim this legitimacy on different grounds.<sup>57</sup> Observers will identify at least five different arguments.

## Elections

Electoral outcomes represent the foremost source of legitimacy, and the only internationally recognised one. As UN declarations and various joint communiqués<sup>58</sup> clearly state, the Libyan House of Representatives, or parliament, elected in June 2014 remains the only

<sup>56</sup> Regarding the fragile Libyan national identity, see A. Baldinetti, 'The Origins of the Libyan Nation: Colonial Legacy, Exile and the Emergence of a New Nation-State' (Oxford: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>57</sup> A. Varvelli, 'Un piano per la Libia', ISPI Policy Brief no. 229, October 2014, accessed at [http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/pb\\_229\\_varvelli\\_2014\\_1.pdf](http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/pb_229_varvelli_2014_1.pdf) on 22 May 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Such as those issued at the Madrid conference in September 2014 and subsequently in New York, underwritten by European countries, the US and various regional actors including Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Turkey.



legitimate body. However, in August 2014, threatened by the militias occupying the capital, the parliament moved from Tripoli to Tobruk, de facto seeking the protection of former General Khalifa Haftar's militias and, indirectly, that of Egypt. Many objected to this decision, which is still being examined by the Libyan Supreme Court. Three elements support doubts about the House's legitimacy: the first being the very low turnout in the last elections. In 2012 about 1.7 million people voted, out of a total of about 2 million, while in 2014 just less than 500,000 Libyans cast votes.<sup>59</sup> In addition, several polling stations were not assigned due to minority groups, such as the Berber and Tuareg peoples, boycotting the ballot. Second, the increasingly strong influence of Egyptian forces in the military sphere, supporting the troops led by General Haftar, constitutes intolerable external interference in Libya's internal affairs. Third, the al-Thani government's progressive loss of control over public institutions such as the Central Bank demonstrates that the House and official government are not, in fact, running the country. While according to international law the House's legitimacy certainly cannot be questioned, Libya's transition process might have been too quick to seek immediate elections rather than making an internationally orchestrated attempt at nation-building and subsequent state-building. Before holding the three elections (General Congress (GNC) in 2012, Constituent Assembly in 2014 and House of Representatives in 2014) that ended up dividing the country, the international community should have pushed for open consultation on how and on what common ground the new Libyan nation should be rebuilt.

## The revolution

A second source of legitimacy is the Libyan revolution. Some of the militias present in the territory were formed during the 2011 rebellion against the Gaddafi regime. These forces rose as 'supporters of the revolution', and continued growing under this banner, even after the demise of the regime. During the revolts, their members, mostly young men, assumed a new role in society: they were no longer simple citizens (mostly unemployed) but *tuwwar* (revolutionaries). These troops have a dual nature: militarily as the Misrata forces and Operation Dawn, and politically as the Islamist front and in particular the MB. These forces are the same ones that previously imposed the law on political isolation which prevented anyone who had formerly held an official position or played a political role under the former regime from participating in political life, and now are forcefully opposing the legitimacy of a parliament and of political forces—like those of Mahmud Jibril—perceived (often correctly) as still closely tied to Gaddafi circles.

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<sup>59</sup> Data provided by the Libyan High National Elections Commission, accessed at <http://hnec.ly/?lang=en> on 22 June 2014.



## Tribes/localities

The tribal nature of Libyan society also plays an important role in establishing the legitimacy of political and cultural forces. The civil war of 2011 gave rise to a modernised version of the country's historical heritage, based on forms of 'localism'. While the influence of clan/tribal culture should not be exaggerated—today, in fact, due to progressive urbanisation, 15% to 20% of the population does not identify with any tribe—this peculiar reality has led to the rise of various small power groups holding circumscribed territorial control, making organic management of the country very complex. These groups, formed around cities, minorities or even small regions, took part in the revolt against the regime and are disinclined to recognise any central authority that has not granted them a share in the country's power management. The collapse of the Gaddafi regime revitalised the element of tribal/local membership, which is now acknowledged by a significant part of the population. A prime example of this dynamic is the role of 'elders' as mediators of conflict between parties.<sup>60</sup>

## Islam

Islamic identity arose as a preponderant cultural element after the fall of the regime. Virtually the entire population identifies as Muslim, and little conflict emerged in the doctrinal sphere after the fall (there was no sectarian division, with Libyan Islam adhering to the Maliki school). Islam thus became a legitimising element in society and politics. As representatives of Islam, competition arose between and among new political parties, renewed religious figures (such as the Grand Mufti) and radical groups of various origins. Among the latter, explicitly jihadist groups are seeking to impose a caliphate in Libya, pursuing their objective through the use of force.<sup>61</sup>

## The fight against terrorism

To counter the emergence of radical groups seeking to use Islam as a legitimising tool, a secular process developed under the banner of the fight against Islamic terrorism. Renegade General Khalifa Haftar was able to gather various groups concerned by the increasing preponderance of radicals in the country's political apparatus. The former general's first farcical attempt to oppose such a change in dynamic occurred in February 2014, when, in a taped proclamation, he tried to take control of the capital, openly seeking the

<sup>60</sup> Concerning Libyan Tribes, see W. Lacher, 'Families, Tribes and Cities in the Libyan Revolution', Middle East Policy XVIII/4 (Winter 2011); and W. Lacher, 'Fault Lines of the Revolution: Political Actors, Camps and Conflict in the New Libya', SWP Research Paper no. 4 (Berlin, May 2013).

<sup>61</sup> A. Y. Zelin, 'The Islamic State's First Colony in Libya', The Washington Institute, Policywatch 2325, 10 October 2014, accessed at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-first-colony-in-libya>, on 22 May 2015.



support of the more secular militias, such as those of Zintan. In more recent months, in Cyrenaica, Haftar has managed to expand this battlefield, joined by the Libyan government (with its few available forces), a large portion of the federalists, most of the Tebu forces in southern Cyrenaica and, above all, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. Haftar's narrative draws on the often indiscriminate fight against 'Islamists', trying to establish direct links to the international community's struggle against the terrorism of the Islamic State and similar groups in the area.<sup>62</sup> This kind of linkage has fostered tactical convergence between radical militias and political Islamist forces of various types (including the MB) that, while lacking ideological affinities, felt openly threatened. Haftar appears capable of rallying popular consensus, especially in the city of Benghazi, exploiting fears of rising extremism and countering the proselytism of the most radical groups. Nonetheless, in the purely military arena, he has not been able to counter successfully the Islamist forces, which have instead come closer together.

With regard to this plurality of sources of legitimacy, the MB in Libya draws its power from three main elements: the revolution, the elections (the 2012 ones in particular) and Islam, in terms of political activation. The position of the MB lies in a 'grey area', which allows for action both within and outside the institutional system. Prior to the 2014 political and military polarisation, the MB was constantly playing with these elements in an attempt to delegitimise secular and 'liberal' forces (depicted as non-Islamic, and as such, linked with the 'evil' regime) or to marginalise Salafi and 'extremist' groups. The MB claims to be the only truly legitimate political actor: it is part of the political constitutional process, but at the same time it guarantees the respect of all Islamic values and norms. Its source of power is ontologically superior to secular ones, as it is derived directly from God's will, while democracy is a human creation and can and should be, when necessary, violated and changed.

According to the MB, neither the liberal bloc or the militias, nor the most radical Islamist groups, can rely on this form of 'enhanced legitimacy'. The former are too connected with the previous regime and with Western secular values; the latter lack institutional vision, and thus cannot become credible political actors.



General Khalifa Haftar, Tripoli

<sup>62</sup> Al Jazeera, 'Khalifa Haftar Sworn in as Libya Army Chief', 10 March 2015, accessed at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/03/khalifa-haftar-libya-army-chief-150309235117764.html> on 22 May 2015.



## The Libyan MB: history and context

The Libyan MB represents a moderate political force founded in the 1950s. In its first 20 years it recruited most of its members among students and the middle class. Several early members still form the leading ranks of the Ikhwan. As Gaddafi arrested hundreds and executed dozens of members, many of its leaders fled into exile and lived for some time in the UK or the US. At present the MB is well organised and can count on a network covering almost all of the country. As in other nations, it is also engaged in the provision social welfare.<sup>63</sup>

The MB appears weaker in Libya than in other Arab states, which can be attributed to Libyan specificities. Its organisation is less structured and its popular base narrower than in Jordan, Egypt and Tunisia. Its present situation has certainly been influenced by both the anti-MB policy of the previous regime and the fact that the Libyan population is wealthier than those in the neighbouring countries. The MB's traditional welfare activities—which have played a crucial role in the success of the movement—have only limited importance here, since the government of Tripoli grants allowances and benefits. Without the social pivot of patronage and welfare activities, the Libyan MB has to place more emphasis on the ideological and doctrinal narrative, which narrows its audience and constituency.

The Libyan MB was tolerated to a limited extent during the first decade of the Gaddafi regime. However, from the 1980s, the movement began to be targeted as a direct threat to the establishment. Its members were then invited to leave the country or to stop the practice of *dawa*. Those who refused to leave and abide by the impositions of the regime were hit by a series of crackdowns conducted by the Libyan security forces (especially from 1995 to 1998). This situation made it impossible for the movement to exert its influence on Libyan society as it had on Egypt's. From 2005, the regime supported dialogue with Islamist actors in the country, especially under the leadership of Saif al-Islam, the son of Muammar.

The MB did not spark the 2011 'revolution', but sustained it through alleged links with militias in eastern Libya, especially the Revolutionary Brigades Coalition (Ittihad Saraya al-Thuwwar), whose main leader was an MB member and former political prisoner. Following the revolution, the MB underwent significant change, electing new leaders and opening up to the general public. The MB led a political campaign with the motto 'You've heard about us, now hear from us'<sup>64</sup>, aimed at gaining popularity and reshaping public opinion of the

<sup>63</sup> O. Ashour, 'Libyan Islamists Unpacked: Rise, Transformation, and Future', Brookings Doha Center (Doha, May 2012), accessed at <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2012/5/02-libya-ashour/omar-ashour-policy-briefing-english.pdf> on 22 May 2015.

<sup>64</sup> Borzou Daraghai, 'Libyan activism blooms in post-Gaddafi era', Financial Times, 18th March 2012, accessed at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/48b10280-620c-11e1-807f-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3f3LE2wIP> on 29 June 2015.



organisation. After the fall of Gaddafi, its main strategies were articulated as the following: distancing itself from the more extreme jihadi actors, who had not renounced violence; reasserting internal control; strengthening linkages with society and fostering credibility at the international level; and forging dialogues with traditional and former jihadi–Salafi groups, as exemplified by its attempt to co-opt former fighters operating under the umbrella of the Ittihad Saraya al-Thuwwar into a national guard force.

In March 2012, members of the MB also founded the Justice and Construction Party (Hizb al-'adala wa-al-binà, JCP), officially open to non-MB members.<sup>65</sup> The first elected party leader, Mohamed Sowan, was a Misratan political prisoner during Gaddafi's regime. In the July 2012 GNC elections, the JCP won just 17 out of the 80 seats reserved for political entities. Yet the JCP was able to wield greater influence in the GNC than its official numbers would suggest, which resulted from a combination of different factors. First, many of its prominent members ran as independents rather than appearing in the party lists (observers estimate that up to 17 more seats were won this way). Second, it was able to create tactical alliances with other independent Salafi candidates, expanding its support to include another 20 GNC members. Third, it had much better internal party discipline (thanks to the fact that most of the party leadership had forged ties while imprisoned under Gaddafi) than the de-facto 'winners' of the election, the National Forces Alliance (Taḥaalof al-qiwa al-wataniyya, NFA), which brought together diverse interest groups.

The MB and the Salafis, as well as other revolutionary groups, believe that the fall of Gaddafi did not bring about the change they had expected and that their revolutionary aspirations have not been fulfilled. They believe that an overhaul of the Libyan state apparatus should cleanse it of power groups linked to the previous regime and base it on an Islamic legal framework. Such a process should concern all sectors—legislative, financial, religious, judicial and executive—and dismiss all officials who held high-ranking positions under the previous regime, considered to be, by definition, corrupt and ideologically anti-Islamist.<sup>66</sup>

For this purpose, in early 2012 the MB-dominated National Transitional Council established an 'integrity commission' tasked with vetting members of the future Congress and other high-ranking political positions at national and local levels. The criteria set out for disbarment included having served as a minister under Gaddafi; having been part of his inner circle or one of his revolutionary committees; or even having spoken against the February 17 revolution or having praised Gaddafi in public or in print. More than a dozen GNC members were subsequently removed from office on the basis of these and other criteria and, notably,

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<sup>65</sup> M. Fitzgerald, 'Introducing the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood', Middle East Channel, Foreign Policy, 2 November 2012, accessed at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/11/02/introducing-the-libyan-muslim-brotherhood/> on 22 May 2015.

<sup>66</sup> M. Fitzgerald, 'Libya's Muslim Brotherhood Struggles to Grow,' Foreign Policy (May 2014), accessed at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/05/01/libyas-muslim-brotherhood-struggles-to-grow/> on 22 May 2015.



disbarments affected the constituencies traditionally considered closer to the Gaddafi-era elites more than the newly emerging religious groups. Their removal from office is said to have favoured the voting power of Islamist groups within the GNC.

In late 2012 the criteria of the 'integrity commission' no longer appeared sufficient, and a new project for a so-called political isolation law (PIL) was begun, causing yet further delays to the work of the GNC. According to some observers, especially Islamists who had suffered lengthy prison terms under Gaddafi, it was wrong to give positions of power to those

who had joined the revolution at the last minute despite having served the regime's interests in the past. For this reason, throughout early 2013 Salafi GNC members and important Islamist activists across the country supported the disbarment of all post-1969 officials, including those who had most aided the revolution. The law, which was passed in May 2013 under threat of the use of force, outlined further criteria to cleanse the judiciary, the military and decision-making positions in the state administrative bodies.<sup>67</sup>

The removal of the Gaddafi-era political and financial elite could create a political vacuum that would allow for the growing influence of new figures friendlier to Islamist groups and parties. This 'substitution' strategy should be considered as a stepping stone towards a broader Islamist strategy, a precondition for the consolidation of an Islamic state, or at the very least, of a more shariah-abiding country. Once the removal of the old political elite is achieved, the next steps to be taken

will be to enshrine Islamic law in the constitution as the sole source of law in Libya, and to establish Islamic courts. In these broad aspirations, the MB (and its political wing, the JCP) and other Salafi groups, despite their ideological differences, share a common goal that for the time being allows for tactical political collaboration.

As exemplified by the case of the PIL, the MB and other Salafi groups clearly consider electoral victories and control of the majority of the parliament as key strategic objectives to ensure adherence of the country's laws to shariah. In this sense it is also becoming clear that the more Salafi fringes of the political spectrum are keen to establish tactical alliances with the MB to ensure an MB victory within the GNC, which they see as necessary to ensuring their own possible future parliamentary domination. The MB and Salafi groups share a central aspiration, which is that shariah be considered the over-arching authority that the constitution depends on, and an insistence, therefore, that the constitution states that 'no



Justice and Construction  
Party logo

<sup>67</sup> The PIL cast a wide net with a negative impact on the administration of the country, removing many qualified officials with unblemished records other than having held high government positions during Gaddafi's 42-year rule.



law can contradict shariah'. Where they differ is on whether shariah should be considered the 'primary source' (*al-masdar al-raisi*) or rather the 'sole source' (*al-masdar al-wahid*).

Increasing multiple legitimacies and the imposition of the PIL are the main reasons for the current political polarisation process. It is evident that the secular and anti-Islamist forces were part of this polarisation in 2013–14, probably influenced by what was happening in the region—with the military takeover in Egypt—the NFA profoundly delegitimised the GNC because it was considered to be overly influenced by the MB and the Salafis. They tried to promote a narrative for the international community that placed all the blame on the Islamists, denying them any institutional role, as they were 'unfit' to govern in a democratic regime. Moreover, this political polarisation created a self-fulfilling spiral and the formation of an alliance between political parties and militias, which is typical of the polarisation process in fragmented and post-conflict societies. The MB converged with Misrata militias, the stronghold of militias in Tripolitania, on the basis of a common aim of removing leaders with ties to the Gaddafi regime and excluding competitors from the political process.<sup>68</sup>

The MB moved to consolidate its power in the GNC. According to Sasha Toperich,<sup>69</sup> Abu Sahmain immediately issued a resolution forming a new, powerful Libyan Revolutionaries' Room militia, financing it with \$700 million from the government. The intent was to create a local armed body to enforce legislation according to its agenda. The Libyan Revolutionaries' Room briefly kidnapped then-Prime Minister Ali Zeidan when they failed to get enough votes to oust him. Zeidan was eventually removed through a continued campaign of intimidation against other GNC members. This alliance went on to assist their brothers in Egypt, awarding \$1.6 billion in aid to the MB government of then-President Morsi.<sup>70</sup> After the fall of Mohammed Morsi in Egypt in July 2013, the Libyan MB strengthened its alliance with Misrata as an indispensable military deterrent.

## The JCP: ideology and political action

In October 2011, the Islamist Ennahdha party (Renaissance Party), linked with the MB and led by Rachid al-Ghannouchi, won—with 37.04% of the votes—the elections for the constituent assembly in Tunisia. The parliamentary elections for the People's Assembly of

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<sup>68</sup> S. Toperich, 'Libya: The Muslim Brotherhood's Last Stand?', The World Post, 24 July 2014, accessed at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sasha-toperich/libya-the-muslim-brotherhoods-last-stand\\_b\\_5618001.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sasha-toperich/libya-the-muslim-brotherhoods-last-stand_b_5618001.html) on 22 May 2015.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.



As a result of the 'spring' of the Islamist parties in the two neighbouring countries in the aftermath of the ousting of the old regimes, and with a view to the forthcoming elections that would be held in July 2012, in March—as already mentioned—the Libyan MB launched its first ever political party: the JCP. Following the examples of the Egyptian FJP, the Tunisian Ennahda Party and the Moroccan Justice and Development Party (Hizb al-'adala wa-al-tanmiyya JDP), this new Libyan political actor presented itself as independent from the global MB.<sup>72</sup> Bashir al-Kabti, general supervisor of the Libyan MB, immediately clarified that the new party would be independent from the global movement in its policy, and that the Egyptian mother organisation would not 'impose its patronage on the party or its members'. Mohamed Sowan, who would soon become the leader of the party, likewise stressed it would be that the party would be independent and open to anyone who met its criteria and that the main intention was not to form a party representing the MB alone.

<sup>71</sup> For an overview of the aftermath of the Arab Spring, see T. Manhire (ed.), 'The Arab Spring: Rebellion, Revolution and a New World Order' (London: Guardian Books, 2012); J. R. Bradley, 'After the Arab Spring: How Islamists Hijacked the Middle East Revolts' (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); V. Colombo, 'Revolts of the People: The Arab Spring—Revolutions to Revolutionize', *Gnosis* 2 (2011), accessed at <http://qnosis.aisi.gov.it/qnosis/Rivista27.nsf/ServNavigE/9> on 13 May 2015.

<sup>73</sup> See, for instance, FJP, 'FJP 2011 Program on Freedom and Political Reforms', 4 December 2011, accessed at <http://www.fjponline.com/article.php?id=197> on 15 May 2015.



strategy was thus to avoid any direct reference to Islam in favour of terms that could refer to both Western and Islamic ideals.

Since 2011, the JCP has stated its intention of being a 'national party, with an Islamic reference'; a democratic organisation whose 'membership is open to anyone who desires to join it'; and whose main aim is to 'establish a civil righteous government through a civilizational programme centred on the identity of the Libyan people and its historical heritage in order to guarantee an honourable life to citizens and an excellent reputation among other world countries for the nation'.<sup>74</sup>

The Islamist background is confirmed in the explanation of the two terms appearing in its denomination. The party's official website explains that:

«the party believes in the idea of 'justice' as expressed in Islamic shariah law. 'And the heaven He raised and imposed the balance that you not transgress within the balance.' (LV, 7–8) The 'justice' in which the party believes is meant to give rights to those who deserve them in accordance with Islamic shariah law . . . by establishing a political, legal, economic and social order following the principles and sources of Islamic shariah law.»<sup>75</sup>

'Construction' has to be understood within an Islamic context. It is derived from the following 'five main principles of the generous shariah':

- construction of a set of noble and rightly-guided values founded on religion, values that represent a guarantee of the true implementation of the law in order to implement the essence of justice in individuals, institutions and the State;
- construction of the spirit that Allah ordered believers to keep and protect, development of any kind of health and therapeutic services, and the importance of the prevention of damage to and the integrity of the body through exercise, sports and consumption of healthy food;
- construction of the mind, knowledge, research, development, promotion of innovation, creativity and originality;
- construction of a strong and cohesive society that preserves its offspring, empowering the family, which is considered the basic structural unit of the *umma*; and
- the exemplary use of the wealth of the state; the just distribution of profits to all citizens; investment for comprehensive development; the promotion of the economy,

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<sup>74</sup> See JCP, 'Ta'rif bi-al-hizb' ['Definition of the Party'], accessed at <http://www.ab.ly/about/template-info-2/ta3reef.html> on 14 May 2015.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.



infrastructure and civil utilities at the highest world standards; the fight against corruption; and the distribution of public wealth.<sup>76</sup>

The definition of 'construction' is a clear reference to Hasan al-Banna's social project as expressed in his 'Letter of Teachings', which is among the pillars of the training and education of any member of the MB:

- He must reform the self to attain a strong body, good character, cultured thought, correct belief and true worship. He should be able to earn his own living, and control his inner instincts. He should be careful about his time, organised in his affairs and willing to offer help and service to others. These comprise the duties of every Brother as an individual.
- He is to establish an Islamic home in order that his family respect his ideology and observe the Islamic code in all aspects of domestic life. He should be wise in selecting his wife and inform her about her rights and duties. He should bring up his children and other household members under his supervision, according to the fundamental principles of Islam. These too are the duties of every Brother.
- He must guide society by spreading the call of righteousness, fighting atrocities and hateful things, encouraging virtue, promoting all that is good, helping the people, trying to win public opinion over to Islamic ideology, and observing the Islamic principles in all aspects of public life. This is the duty of individual Brothers as well as the organisation working as a unit.
- He is required to liberate the homeland from all foreign, un-Islamic control, whether political, economic or ideological.
- He must reform the government so that it may become truly Islamic, acting as a servant to the nation in the interests of the people. Islamic government is a government whose officers are Muslims and perform the obligatory duties of Islam, do not make public their disobedience, and enforce the rules and teachings of Islam.<sup>77</sup>

Thus the new party of the Libyan MB, '...after removing the spectre of tyranny and oppression...',<sup>78</sup> aimed to reform Libyan society in light of al-Banna's teachings, adapted to the specific national context and environment.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> See H. al-Banna, 'Risalat al-ta'alim' ['Letter of Teachings'], in *Rasa'il al-imam al-shahid Hasan al-Banna* [Letters of the martyr imam Hasan al-Banna], (Cairo: Dar al-Fath, 2012), 358–9.

<sup>78</sup> JCP, 'Al-nashà wa-al-ta'sis' ['Genesis and Foundation'], accessed at <http://www.ab.ly/about/template-info-2/what-s-new-2.html> on 13 May 2015.



The man chosen to lead the new party and implement justice and promote construction in post-Gaddafi Libya was Mohamed Sowan, a native of Misrata, who was symbol of the past repression of the MB, having been a political prisoner under Gaddafi for eight years.

Elections held in July 2012 confirmed that the Libyan MB had definitely failed to match the success of its sister parties, which had reached power in Egypt and Tunisia. The final results gave the centrist NFA, led by Mahmud Jibril, and its allies 41 seats and the JCP 17 party seats, showing both the structural weakness of the Libyan MB and the lack of coordination among the Islamist forces in general and the MB in particular.<sup>79</sup>

Although the JCP had been perceived as the only political player of the MB in Libya, as early as 2011, Ali Sallabi, a Libyan living in Qatar, had announced the birth of the National Gathering for Freedom, Justice and Development. In April 2012, this party was renamed the Homeland Party (al-Watan) and took part in the elections, even though it did not win any seats.<sup>80</sup>

If Mohamed Sowan can be considered the representative of the internal Libyan MB, Ali Sallabi is the key player in the global MB, namely that of Qatar, in Libya. In the 1980s Sallabi spent eight years in Gaddafi's Abu Salem prison for involvement in activities against the regime. Soon after his release he moved to Saudi Arabia where he earned a bachelor's degree at the Islamic University in Medina, before finishing his studies at Omdourman Islamic University in Sudan in 1999. He finally moved to Qatar where he started to cooperate closely with Egyptian Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi and the International Union of Muslim Scholars. Sallabi's link with the political strategy and ideology of the global MB is confirmed by his book *The Jurisprudence of Victory and Empowerment in the Noble Qur'an*.<sup>81</sup> In his book, 'empowerment' (*tamkin*) is described as 'the seizure of political power' that has to be reached through four gradual steps: *ta'rif*, that is, 'presentation', the extension and spread of Islam, addressing a wide public without distinctions and *istifā*, the 'selection' of individuals from among the larger audience who will bear and transmit the Islamist message wherever they are in society. The selection is based on criteria such as piety, intelligence, physique and productivity. Individuals thus selected will perform specific actions and supply greater spiritual effort, along with being able, if necessary, to respond to the call of jihad, which is a possible option. The next step is *mughalaba*, the 'confrontation' of quantitative and qualitative weaknesses recognised within the organisation. During this phase all the gaps should be filled, at all levels and in all areas. The objective is for the organisation to have a

<sup>79</sup> See EU Assessment Team, 'Libya: Final Report'. General National Congress Election 7 July 2012, accessed at [http://www.eueom.eu/files/pressreleases/english/eueat-libya-2012-final-report\\_en.pdf](http://www.eueom.eu/files/pressreleases/english/eueat-libya-2012-final-report_en.pdf) on 15 May 2015.

<sup>80</sup> 'Hizb al-watan al-libi' ["Libyan al-Watan Party"], Al Jazeera, at <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2012/7/4/بيبي-لل-ان-طول-بزح>, accessed on 13 May 2015.

<sup>81</sup> A. Sallabi, 'Fiqh al-nasr wa-al-tamkin fi al-Qur'an al-Karim (Beirut', Dar al-ma'arifa, 2009).



religious army, very respectful of the letter and spirit of shariah law, and, in addition, highly specialised in all areas of social, political and economic life and the final step is *tamkin*, 'empowerment' which is the seizure of power and the victory of political Islam.<sup>82</sup>

Sallabi's theory explains, on one hand, his proximity to Qaradawi's theory of 'moderation' and gradualism in reaching political power, and on the other, why he has turned out to be a key ideologue and actor for the MB in the transition to democracy in the post-Gaddafi era. Sallabi's strong relationship with Qaradawi was confirmed in 2011 when the Sheikh of Al Jazeera issued a fatwa that authorised the killing of Gaddafi because the tyrant had 'killed the sons of his people' and called on the Libyan army to follow the examples of the '...Tunisian army that refused to obey the fugitive president Zein al-Abidin Ben Ali when he ordered [them] to open fire against the demonstrators...' and of the '...great Egyptian army that protected the revolution'. At the time Sallabi officially declared that he would refuse any offer of dialogue from the regime because '...the [Libyan] people will rule in the streets and will win over Gaddafi and his sons with Allah's blessing'.<sup>83</sup>

In December 2012, after the electoral defeat of the MB, Sallabi, together with Libyan scholar Salem al-Sheikhi—who is a member of the Dublin-based European Council for Fatwa and Research, headed by Yusuf Qaradawi—took part in a meeting of the International Union of Muslim Scholars about the situation in Libya. Sallabi and Sheikhi highlighted the difficulties they were facing, such as the opposition of liberal and secular forces, and that the Salafis had not learned the lesson from Tunisia and had not accepted of the impossibility of creating an Islamic state in a formerly secular one. The meeting concluded with the international MB institution offering complete support to its Libyan counterpart.

In July 2013 the global MB received its first blow since the beginning of the Arab Spring: Mohamed Morsi's ousting in Egypt. The event could not but have repercussions for the other MB parties, namely Ennahdha in Tunisia and the JCP in Libya. In an interview with Al Arabiya, Rachid al-Ghannouchi described the failure of the Egyptian experience as '...a fruit of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's naiveté...' and eagerness for power. In an interview with the same newspaper, Mohamed Sowat was less critical of Morsi and the FJP: '...I may disagree with the policies of the Freedom and Justice Party, and it certainly did make mistakes, but what happened was a military coup, and, in this way, there cannot be a proper democracy in the Arab world: what is built on lies is a lie.' Sowat highlighted that his party

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 270–361.

<sup>83</sup> See "Al-Qaradawi yufti bi-qatal al-Qaddhafi wa-al-Sallabi yarfidh ayy da'wa li-al-hiwar ma'a al-nizam" ["Qaradawi issues a fatwa allowing the killing of Gaddafi and Sallabi refuses any request of dialogue with the regime"], at <http://www.alrafi3.com/forum/showthread.php/19499-ا-م-را-و-ع-د-ي-ا-ض-ف-ر-ي-ب-ال-ص-ل-و-ي-ف-ا-ن-ق-ل-ال-ل-ت-ق-ب-ي-ي-ف-ي-ي-وا-ض-ر-ق-ل-ا>, accessed on 15 May, 2015



could not help Morsi because it was not in power and that it was an ‘...internal Egyptian affair...’.<sup>84</sup>

The destiny of the first Egyptian president belonging to the MB would in any case influence the next steps and strategies of the Islamist movement in the region. On 28 September 2013, Ennahda was the first Islamist party to accept voluntarily a plan to relinquish power because, as former Foreign Minister Rafik Abdessalam declared, they were not ‘...ashamed of these concessions because they are needed by Tunisia and to secure our democratic experience so that Tunisia can reach a safe shore.’<sup>85</sup> It was clear that Ennahda had chosen the most pragmatic solution so as to avoid the tale of the FJP in Egypt and to ensure that it was considered a reliable actor in the political arena.

In Libya, in May 2014 General Khalifa Haftar followed the Egyptian model of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and launched ‘Operation Dignity’ (al-Karama), with the specific aim of attacking Islamist forces and parties, among them the MB. One month later, in the June 2014 legislative elections, the Brotherhood fared even worse than in 2012, securing only 25 of the 200 available seats. The unfavourable results and its opposition to General Haftar led the Libyan MB to choose confrontation and avoid conciliation. In August, Fajr Libya, the coalition of Islamist militias, drove the elected government of Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thani out of Tripoli and supported the creation of a rival government.

The internal political battle that has since broken out in Libya between the secular, pro-Sisi, anti-MB General Haftar—whose territory is actually working as a buffer zone to protect Egypt from any Islamist incursion—and the Islamist faction does not seem to be heading towards the ‘reconciliation’ that the Special Representative and Head of the UN in Libya, Bernardino Leon, is looking for. Once again, the Libyan MB is working with two different strategies, the first for the national level and the second for the international level. At the national level, Mohamed Sowan has turned down any possibility of ‘national dialogue’ with Haftar, but at the same time has taken part in the talks held under the auspices of Algeria and Morocco, but sponsored by the UN.<sup>86</sup> Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia are the only regional key players that can exert pressure on the Libyan Brotherhood to turn it into a pragmatic

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<sup>84</sup> K. Mahmoud, ‘In Conversation with Libyan Brotherhood’s Muhammad Suwan’, *Asharq al-Awsat*, 23 July 2013, accessed at <http://www.aawsat.net/2013/07/article55310765/in-conversation-with-muhammed-suwan> on; *Al-Arabiya.net*, ‘AlGhannouchi: Ikhwān Miṣr faqadu al-huqūq bi tariqa sabyaniyya, *Al-Arabiya*’ [‘Ghannouchi: Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt Lost their Power out of Naïveté’] 4 May 2014, accessed at <http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/egypt/2014/05/04/اب-ج-ح-رس-كي-يشون-غل-ا-دقت-ي-ن-ا-غودرا-ر-ص-م-ناوخ-ا-دقت-ي-ن-ا-غودرا> on 13 May 2015.

<sup>85</sup> C. Gall, ‘Islamist Party in Tunisia to Step Down’, *New York Times*, 28 September 2015, accessed at [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/world/africa/islamist-party-in-tunisia-to-step-down.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/world/africa/islamist-party-in-tunisia-to-step-down.html?_r=0) on 12 May 2015.

<sup>86</sup> See ‘Experts: Morocco, Algeria Compete Over Mediating Regional Crises’, *Middle East Monitor*, 27 March 2015, accessed at <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/africa/17548-experts-morocco-algeria-compete-over-mediating-regional-crises> on 12 May 2015.



actor that can play a pivotal role in the fight against Islamic State and turn Libya into a stable country that could act as a security buffer for Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria. Although the three Maghreb countries have different backgrounds and different relationships with the MB, all of them have included its parties in the democratic process. This makes them reliable 'internal' partners for the Tripoli government.

In May 2015 Sallabi stated that reconciliation is necessary, but that there should not be any external intervention. Instead, it should come about through new elections. He also urged 'the United Nations envoy to Libya as well as members of parliament and the General National Conference who participated in the dialogue to embark on a road map that leads to fair elections instead of wasting time and effort and manipulating the Libyans' feelings in preparation to invade their country under the pretext of combating terrorism'.<sup>87</sup>

According to Sallabi's theory of empowerment, the Libyan MB is going through a phase of confrontation and must fill the gaps and improve its weak popular support to gain more power and credibility. It finds itself at a crucial juncture and has to decide whether to follow Ennahda's pragmatism and survive, or the FJP's naïveté and eagerness and die.

## MB connections: the Egyptian—Libyan axis

After Gaddafi was ousted in 2011, the links between the MB in Libya and the MB in Egypt grew quickly, despite the existing deep differences between the two movements in their history and in their interactions with the masses. The history of the MB in Libya is interlinked with that of the MB in Egypt. It dates to 1949, when a number of Egyptian MB members escaped from Egypt and took refuge in Libya, where they were hosted by Prince Idris al-Senussi after being suspected of involvement in the assassination of Egyptian Prime Minister Mahmoud al-Nuqrashi Pasha. In the 1950s more Egyptian MB activists came to Libya after the Free Officers Revolution and Gamal Abdel Nasser's rise to power. It was only a few years before Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's coup in 1969 that the Egyptian refugees and the Libyan Islamists actually formed an ideological movement. After the institution of the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya in 1973, the group froze most of its activities to avoid suppression; however, one year later, Gaddafi started to expel the leaders of the MB from Libya and severely repress those that remained.<sup>88</sup> Although banned in Libya, the

<sup>87</sup> See Middle East Monitor, 'Libyan Cleric Calls for Selections to Resolve Political Conflict', 5 May 2015, accessed at <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/africa/18432-libyan-cleric-calls-for-selections-to-resolve-political-conflict> on 12 May 2015.

<sup>88</sup> G. Dentice and A. Varvelli, 'Le trasformazioni dei movimenti islamisti in Libia dopo Gheddafi', in R. di Peri (ed.), 'Dopo le "primavere arabe": Islam, politica e democrazia', Rivista di Politica 2 (2014), Rubettino Editore, 97.



MB survived abroad, especially in Europe and the US, where the largest groups of Libyan political opponents to Gaddafi's regime live.<sup>89</sup>

Since the Benghazi conference in mid-November 2011—the first public appearance of Libyan Islamists in the country in 25 years—the tentative attempts that are being made to restore a connection with the Egyptians have been very clear. Like its Egyptian counterpart, the Libyan MB presents itself as a moderate Islamic movement that supports democracy, civil society and human rights, while at the same time seeing Islam as the basis for legislation. The visit to Benghazi by Yusuf Qaradawi, one of the most important international Muslim scholars and a figure close to the MB, may have been another step focused on strengthening the MB in Libya.<sup>90</sup>

Similarly, like the FJP in Egypt, the JCP has presented itself as a force independent of the Libyan MB. However there are some evident connections between the ideological movement and the political party. On 2-3 March 2012, the MB held a conference in Tripoli at which it announced the establishment of the JCP, modelled on Egypt's FJP, the political faction of its Egyptian counterpart. As Chernitsky has written in his article on MEMRI, the Libyan MB General Supervisor Bashir al-Kabti expressed the hope that his movement would learn from the experience of the MB in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, where it has taken part in the democratisation process and won a majority in their parliaments.<sup>91</sup> At the same time, al-Kabti was anxious to demonstrate that the Libyan MB and JCP are not offshoot groups of Egypt's MB, drawing attention to their political and ideological authenticity. Although the JCP won only 17 seats of the 80 available in the GNC in the election in July 2012, the Islamist party took part in the formation of the national unity government. As already discussed, the partial political failure of the JCP/MB was determined by a mix of several key factors, including the lack of entrenched roots in Libyan society, the heterogeneous Islamist front and the various tribal dynamics. These factors have prevented the Islamist group from presenting itself as a real political alternative to the system of power in the country.<sup>92</sup>

Cohabitation in government between Islamists and secularists has not always worked in the last year and a half, causing a serious political and institutional crisis that has paralysed the country. One of the triggers was the approval in May 2013 of the controversial PIL, strongly

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<sup>89</sup> O. Ashour, 'Libya's Muslim Brotherhood Faces the Future', *Foreign Policy* (March 2012), accessed at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/03/09/libyas-muslim-brotherhood-faces-the-future/> on 21 May 2015.

<sup>90</sup> B. Chernitsky, 'Libyan Muslim Brotherhood on the Rise', Middle East Media Research Institute, Inquiry & Analysis Series Report no. 828 (24 April 2012), accessed at <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/252/0/6301.htm> on 21 May 2015.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> See also Fitzgerald, 'Libya's Muslim Brotherhood'; R. Ben Chahine, 'I mille volti della Fratellanza', *Limes-Rivista italiana di Geopolitica* 1 (2013), 136–7.



supported by the MB and its allies and other groups in the General Congress. According to Mark Kersten,

the PIL's enactment represented a far-reaching attempt to prevent members of the regime of Muammar Gaddafi from holding public office during the country's transition. But the decision also appeared to fit a precarious pattern of post-conflict accountability in Libya, which has been characterized by acts of vengeance and one-sided justice aimed at anyone associated with the defeated regime. The passage of the law also reflects the current state of political instability in Libya wherein decisions are politically motivated and often forced at the barrel of the gun rather than agreed upon through public consultation and democratic decision-making.<sup>93</sup>

The ousting of Morsi in Egypt in July 2013 had an even more destabilising impact on the Libyan political and security context than the passing of the PIL. Fearing that a similar scenario might be repeated in Libya, the JCP, the MB and its allies attacked the secular government of Prime Minister Ali Zeidan. In September 2013, during a bilateral meeting in Egypt between Zeidan and the Egyptian Defence Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the JCP accused the Libyan prime minister of endorsing the new anti-MB course in Cairo. The JCP leadership reiterated threats to withdraw from the government and called on the GNC to issue a vote of no confidence in Zeidan. In January 2014, the JCP withdrew its five members from Zeidan's cabinet and, in March 2014, following the case of the rogue oil tanker *Morning Glory*, Zeidan was ousted by the MB vote in the GNC. Finally, in April 2014, the resignation—later withdrawn—of ad interim Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thani and tensions surrounding the controversial election of Ahmed Maiteg as the new premier in an irregular vote of the GNC provided the conditions for the implosion of the Libyan political landscape and the beginning of a rapid polarisation process, especially between secularist and Islamist forces.<sup>94</sup> These tensions threaten the Libyan state's cohesion and position Libya near to collapse.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>93</sup> M. Kersten, 'Libya's Political Isolation Law: Politics and Justice or the Politics of Justice?', Middle East Institute, 5 February 2014, accessed at <http://www.mei.edu/content/libyas-political-isolation-law-politics-and-justice-or-politics-justice> on 21 May 2015.

<sup>94</sup> On the Libyan civil war, see J. Pack, K. Mezran and M. Eljarh, 'Libya's Faustian Bargains: Breaking the Appeasement Cycle', Atlantic Council, May 2014, accessed at [http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Libyas\\_Faustian\\_Bargains.pdf](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Libyas_Faustian_Bargains.pdf) on 22 May 2015; D. Gartenstein-Ross and N. Barr, 'Dignity and Dawn: Libya's Escalating Civil War', International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague, 26 February 2015, accessed at <http://www.icct.nl/publications/icct-papers/dignity-and-dawn-libyas-escalating-civil-war> on 22 May 2015; F. Wehrey, 'Ending Libya's Civil War: Reconciling Politics, Rebuilding Security', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2014, accessed at [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/ending\\_libya\\_civ\\_war.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/ending_libya_civ_war.pdf) on 22 May 2015.

<sup>95</sup> A. Boukhars et al., 'The Egypt Effect: Sharpened Tensions, Reshuffled Alliances', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13 February 2014, accessed at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/02/13/egypt-effect-sharpened-tensions-reshuffled-alliances#> on 22 May 2015.



At the same time, the prominent role played by the Libyan MB in the growing chaos in Libya was particularly unwelcome in Cairo. After Morsi's fall in July 2013, the civil–military regime in Cairo launched a brutal crackdown against the Egyptian MB, jailing some of its leaders such as Safwat Hegazy and Murad Ali, who had tried to cross the Libyan border into Egypt near Salloum.<sup>96</sup> The Egyptian MB was perceived as solely responsible for the growing instability in the country. The Egyptian authorities have declared 'war' on the MB because they are sure that the Islamist group is linked to jihadist groups. However, these alleged connections have never been completely proven.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, in the month following Morsi's ousting, security and (counter)terrorism were top priorities for the Egyptian government, due to the permanent tensions and attacks in the Sinai Peninsula and on the porous Egyptian–Libyan border, where more armed groups had found a safe haven in eastern Libya. The collaboration between Libyan tribes, militias, disillusioned/radicalised Egyptian–Libyan MB members and jihadist groups has fostered the penetration of these local/transnational actors into internal political dynamics. It has also encouraged the development of the illegal network of smugglers and guerrilla jihadi, which has ensured the financing of the jihadist groups and the control of the territory. In particular, in the territory between the Libyan border crossing and the Egyptian Western Desert, some Salafist/jihadist groups linked to the Sinai Province (also known as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis) have claimed responsibility for several high-profile attacks in al-Wahat, al-Farafra and Marsa Matrouh which killed more than 40 Egyptian soldiers in the summer of 2014.<sup>98</sup> These frequent attacks provoked the suggestion that Egypt get involved in the situation in Libya, an idea that was immediately discouraged by the Egyptian MB to avoid 'catastrophic consequences'.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Al-Arabiya English, 'Egypt Arrests Muslim Brotherhood-Linked Cleric Safwat Hegazy', 21 August 2013, accessed at <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/08/21/Egypt-arrests-Muslim-Brotherhood-linked-cleric-Safwat-Hegazy-.html> on 22 May 2015.

<sup>97</sup> According to former militant and founder of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Nabil Naeem, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis is funded by the MB's Deputy Supreme Guide, Khayrat al-Shater. See Egypt Independent, 'Islamic Jihad Founder: Brotherhood has been Funding Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis', 9 September 2013, accessed at <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/islamic-jihad-founder-brotherhood-has-been-funding-ansar-bayt-al-maqdis> on 22 May 2015. See also, V. Colombo, 'The Muslim Brotherhood and Terrorist Organizations', Gatestone Institute, 6 May 2014, accessed at <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/4297/muslim-brotherhood-ansar-bayt-al-maqdis> on 22 May 2015.

<sup>98</sup> See also G. Dentice, 'Sinai: The Next Frontier of Jihadism?', in A. Plebani (ed.), *New (and Old) Patterns of Jihadism: Al-Qa'ida, the Islamic State and Beyond*, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (Milan, October 2014), 85–6, accessed at <http://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/new-and-old-patterns-jihadism-al-qaida-islamic-state-and-beyond-11099> on 22 May 2015.

<sup>99</sup> A. Nader, 'Egypt's Involvement in Libyan Conflict a Threat to National Security: MB', Daily News Egypt, 25 August 2014, accessed at <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2014/08/25/egypts-involvement-libyan-conflict-threat-national-security-mb/> on 22 May 2015.



Therefore, insecurity in Libya (and in Cyrenaica, in particular) is perceived in Cairo as a direct threat to national security. The risk is that Libya's eastern border could become a no man's land and subsequently an important logistics hub for the flow of militants and weapons from Libya to the Sinai Peninsula. To counter the growth of the Islamist movement in Libya, Egyptian authorities have identified a range of terrorist threats to its national security, including that of the Free Egyptian Army (FEA). According to an anonymous state security source cited by the newspaper *Al-Akhbar*, FEA is an anti-government Islamist movement based in Libya, with growing links to Ansar al-Sharia Libya. According to the cited source, 'attempts to create a Free Egyptian Army in Libya have been identified, with the participation of the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda and under Qatari-Turkish-Iranian patronage, in addition to plans to target vital installations, including Cairo International Airport, the storming of prisons to free Muslim Brotherhood detainees, and spreading chaos to sabotage the presidential elections'.<sup>100</sup> The commander of the group is Sharif al-Radwani, an experienced Egyptian jihadist. Some FEA members have had previous jihadist experience in Syria and Libya. According to Nabil Naeem, former leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, total FEA membership consists of three thousand fighters, based in three Libyan training camps in Zintan, Abu Salim and Derna. Although the FEA's existence has not been proven, unknown Egyptian security officials told to Saudi newspaper *Asharq al-Awsat* that the group is 'not yet organised as an army in the real sense but a movement that can create security problems for Egypt'.<sup>101</sup> The existence of the organisation emerged for the first time in April 2014, when former Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy admitted during a US-Egypt summit in Washington 'that one of Egypt's security concerns about Libya was the recent formation of a new Islamist movement in the country, known as the Free Egyptian Army, the goal of which is the destabilization of Egypt'.<sup>102</sup> Libyan officials, including some Libyan Muslim Brothers detained in Cairo, deny the existence of this jihadist brigade as well as any connection to the MB and al-Qaeda.<sup>103</sup>

Regardless of the veracity of the MB connection with jihadist cells, the alleged proliferation of radical Islamists in both countries represents a real threat to the stability of the Middle East and North Africa region.

<sup>100</sup> I. Ibrahim, 'Egypt: Free Egyptian Army Being Formed in Libya', *Al-Akhbar*, 10 April 2014, accessed at <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/19368> on 22 May 2015.

<sup>101</sup> *Asharq al-Awsat*, 'لجيوهت «رحال يرضم لاشي جال» نا دكوتو «ناوخال» لاريبك اعجارت دصرت فينم اريارت ديذغي نوברה نويمالس! ديذغي', 2 May 2014, accessed at <http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=770458&issue-no=12939#.VZaX6Rvtmko> on 29 June 2015.

<sup>102</sup> A. Mahjar-Barducci, 'Libya: Islamist Group Forms to Destabilize Egypt' (6 May 2014), accessed at <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/4303/libya-free-egyptian-army> on 22 May 2015.

<sup>103</sup> *Ahram Online*, 'Libyan Militant Leader Denies Connection to Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda', 28 January 2014, accessed at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/92827/Egypt/Politics-/Libyan-militant-leader-denies-connection-to-Muslim.aspx> on 22 May 2015.



## Conclusion

Although the Libyan MB has chosen a moderate political platform, many elements of its activity remain ambiguous. The repression of its Egyptian sister organisation, together with international and national developments around Libya's worsening security situation, have pressured the group into an alliance-seeking strategy, which has fuelled the rise of 'friendly' militias. Today Libya's MB faces two parallel struggles. On the one hand, the positive Tunisian experience is providing support for the development of democratic participatory processes in North Africa. On the other, the Egyptian example illustrates how maintaining a strong military profile may prove a necessary measure in Libya as a future deterrent for repression. Nonetheless, the group is maintaining its commitment to UN-led international negotiations.

Libya is no doubt a key country for the global MB, which is living through one of the darkest moments in its history and cannot be satisfied with only partial success for the Tunisian branch. It desperately needs to acquire more strength at the international level to press for a solution in Egypt. In this regard, Sallabi will play a fundamental role. On the other hand, the Libyan MB still has to win the hearts of its citizens and voters. Unfortunately for the Brotherhood, the tribal context has recently become a more fertile ground for the radical Islamic State and jihadi Islamism—as has been the case in Syria, Iraq and the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. In the struggle to win the hearts of the populace, Sowat and al-Kabti should be the key players.

However, careful consideration of the recent history of the Brotherhood's political party in Tunisia should teach the Libyan MB that inclusion and national dialogue are the only solutions for the survival of an Islamist party like the JCP. In the future the Libyan MB should consider leaving aside any wishful thinking about 'empowerment'.





# ESSAY

# MAPP



3

NGRA

ESSAY 3



# MAPPING RADICAL ISLAMIST MILITIAS IN LIBYA



## ESSAY 3

# MAPPING RADICAL ISLAMIST MILITIAS IN LIBYA

Wolfgang Pusztaï and Arturo Varvelli



The current situation in Libya is fluid, fragile and fraught with contradictions. Its dynamics are anything but easy to understand. Before differentiating patterns of militancy, examining tactics and trends, explaining attitudes of tribal groups towards Islamism and goals of jihadist militias, a comprehensive picture of radical Islamist militias must account for competing definitions of the term 'radical Islamists'. The 'Islamist' 'government' and militias appear to be consolidating their gains through political, economic and military means. How many radical militias are there in the country? What is their agenda? Is the alliance with the 'government' in Tripoli based on tactics, or on a shared vision?

The connections among the major players before and during the revolution shed light on current Islamist networks in Libya, in which 'radical Islamist militias' are embedded. 'Radical' means 'associated with political views, practices, and policies of extreme change'.<sup>104</sup> 'Islamists by definition are adherents of an ideological movement that wants Islam to govern all aspects of society; from economy, politics and culture, to communal relations and family, whereby society is regulated through Sharia [Islamic law]'.<sup>105</sup>

All radical Islamist militias in Libya aim to establish, by violent means if necessary, a conservative Islamist state in the country, with Sharia law-based legislation. Some of them pursue the long-term objective to establish a 'global caliphate': a state ruled in accordance with Islamic law by a single political and religious leader. However, fragmentation characterises not only Libya's political and security situation but also its radical Islamist militias.

<sup>104</sup> Merriam-Webster, s.v. 'radical', accessed at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/radical> on 30 May 2015.

<sup>105</sup> Governments of Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, 'Libya: Militias, Tribes and Islamists', 19 December 2014, accessed at <https://www.government.nl/documents/reports/2014/12/20/libya-militias-tribes-and-islamists> on 5 September 2015, 26.



## The political background and the development of ‘semi-official security forces’

As post-Qaddafi Libya’s rule of law and the monopoly on the legitimate use of force by the central authority could not be established, instabilities seem to be favouring extremist tendencies. For months the government in Tripoli controlled only the capital and part of Tripolitania. Numerous militias that fought against the Qaddafi regime in 2011 refused to integrate into a single national army or the police force and recognised the central authority only in late 2012 and early 2013. Furthermore, in autumn 2011, revolutionaries all over Libya had grown from 50,000 individuals to more than 270,000 in a few months. This process had two main causes. First, Interim Prime Minister Abdel Rahim El Keib approved random payments to *thumar* (revolutionaries). Second, he stated that Libya would take its time with collecting weapons. This caused the explosion in numbers of so-called revolutionaries and enabled the build-up of radical Islamist groups under the pretence of developing legitimate militias.<sup>106</sup>

The central government decided to co-opt militias in new ‘national’ structures, as had historically occurred after similar situations (e.g. post-2003 Iraq). It renounced the dissolution of the militias and enrolment of individual *thumar* within the army. The objective was to avoid new conflicts on the path towards national reconciliation. However, such a policy does not actually disband militias: it simply tries to neutralise their anti-systemic posture, accepting them within a broader and more institutional framework.

As a result, an increasing number of individuals from various militias were accepted into the police force. Although equipment improved, training standards lagged behind. Similarly, the build-up of the army proceeded slowly, because the bulk of units consisted of militias that ‘subordinated’ themselves under the authority of the Libyan Army. This included mighty militias from Misrata and Zintan, as well as from the Al Zuwayya tribe in Cyrenaica—but only a few really reliable ‘elite units’. Moreover, the ministries’ control remained precarious because many of the militias were integrated wholesale and retained their own internal structures.

In the effort to build up new security forces and demobilise all unnecessary units, Interim Prime Minister El Keib approved the establishment of two temporary forces to support the police and military in their transition phase, until sufficient regular forces had been established. However, Islamists in the Ministries of the Interior and Defence ensured that many of the higher-ranking positions in both these semi-official security forces were given

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<sup>106</sup> Dr Monem Alyaser, former President of the National Security Committee in the GNC; from several interviews by the authors via Skype and email in May 2015.



to fellow Islamists. Several of the current radical Islamist militias were earlier part of these loose organisations; some still belong to them.

The *Supreme Security Committee* (SSC), subordinated to the Ministry of the Interior, was established on 22 February 2012 to support the police. Branches were established in major cities all over the country and included various local militias and individuals, many of them with an Islamist background. In Tripoli they were also involved in destroying Sufi shrines. In total, more than 150,000 lightly armed fighters were officially registered as members of the SSC and received salaries although their actual number was not higher than 50,000.<sup>107</sup> The commander of the SSC in Tripoli was Hashim Bishr from Souk al-Jouma, an influential Salafist. He was in control of the Mitiga airport and remains a very influential person in Tripoli.

The *Libya Shield Force* (LSF) was established on 8 August 2012 in an attempt to create an auxiliary force for the Libyan Army. The major units are Libya Shield East (mainly in Benghazi), Centre (from Misrata, Khoms, Zliten and Tarhuna) and West (from Gharyan, Zawiya and Sabratha). Each of these is divided into several subunits. At its peak the LSF had between 8,000 and 10,000 members although several of the militias have been only loosely connected with the organisation. The number that their leaders were using to get salaries was more than 140,000. This was a way for warlords to get money (in cash) and distribute it as they wanted. This wasteful practice has been continued by all the governments and by the General National Congress (GNC)—the parliament Libyans voted for in July 2012.<sup>108</sup>

Both formations extensively recruited individuals and entire units, mainly from Islamist-leaning militias. Becoming part of the SSC or LSF presented major advantages for the *thuwar*, since this provided legitimisation and government funding. Furthermore, payments to individuals are on average higher than those available in the official police force and army. In 2012–13 a general's salary was 1,200 Libyan dinar a month. Some of the militias were giving 1,800 dinar a month to teenagers who were even too young to fight in 2011. Although both the SSC and LSF were originally set up as temporary forces, it proved difficult to disband them. The vast majority of LSF and several units of the SSC still exist although a major part of the SSC was dismantled from early 2014 on. Many of them joined the LSF to keep their payments.

The most important result of this build-up in militia strength was the GNC's approval of a sweeping political isolation law on 5 May 2013. As a consequence, numerous officials who worked for the regime were disbarred from political office and from government jobs for 10

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.<sup>108</sup> Ibid.



years even though some had contributed to the downfall of the late dictator. Their departure from ministries and government decreased bureaucratic efficiency and governance competence, widening the existing 'leadership deficit' in Libya. Subsequently, GNC President Muhammad Magarief resigned on 28 May, followed on 4 August 2013 by the Deputy Prime Minister Awadh al-Barasi and by the Minister of the Interior Mohammed Khalifa al-Sheikh, who had been appointed less than four months earlier. Both al-Barasi and al-Sheikh sharply criticised the prime minister's management of the cabinet and his lack of leadership against the militias. This weakened the already shaky authority of the 'New Libya' and the government of Prime Minister Ali Zeidan even more. As Jamie Dettmer emphasises,<sup>109</sup> the beneficiaries of the Political Isolation Law are not only the major militias that besieged key ministries and threatened to storm the GNC unless the law was passed but also their allies in the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun, MB) and smaller Islamist parties.

## Militias and Salafi ideology

Many of the members of these militias adhere to the conservative Salafi movement, and many militias define themselves as 'Salafi' or simply 'Islamic'. The Salafi movement is the fastest-growing group within Sunni Islam across the world.<sup>110</sup> Originating at the end of nineteenth century, this movement sought to respond to the political, cultural and military challenges represented by Western colonialism. Salafis seek the 'purification' of Islam by returning to (a mythical) original, uncorrupted form of Islam which they believe was practised at the time of Muhammad and the first *khalifas*. Salafi movements emerged throughout the Muslim world, from Southwest Asia to the Mediterranean. They include Rashid Rida's *Salafiyya* and its counterpart in Indonesia. In the beginning these movements were perceived as reformist movements, with strictly religious, non-political agendas.

The basic notion of Salafism is that Islam has strayed from its origins. Some Salafi scholars have influenced the modernist tendency in Islam. In general many Salafi movements have become very dogmatic and radicalised. They are often associated with violent (and even terrorist) circles. However, their original focus was not on violence but on re-Islamisation at the daily level, following the ideological path traced by Sayyid Qutb, the leader of the MB (who is still the basic reference for all jihadist groups as well as for most of the movements of violent Islamic activism).

<sup>109</sup> J. Dettmer, 'Libyan Militias Shape Country's Future', The Jamestown Foundation, 24 May 2013, accessed at [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Bsword%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx\\_ttnews%5Bany\\_of\\_the\\_words%5D=PKK&tx\\_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=4&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=40922&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=381&cHash=56c078692fa7c52318c2bd7f7dca0389#.VbYOj\\_ntlHw](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Bsword%5D=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews%5Bany_of_the_words%5D=PKK&tx_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=4&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40922&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=381&cHash=56c078692fa7c52318c2bd7f7dca0389#.VbYOj_ntlHw) on 27 July 2015

<sup>110</sup> The term 'Salafi' is derived from al-salaf al-salih, Arabic for 'righteous ancestors', which refers to the first two generations of Islam.



Salafis are characterised by extreme conservatism and a pronounced emphasis on religious orthopraxis, as well as by outward manifestations of religious piety, such as beards, 'Islamic' dress and strict segregation of the sexes. They are obsessed with 'correct' daily practices. Salafis seek to create a pure Islamic society but not necessarily through conventional politics (in several cases they have even rejected elections and democracy, considering it non-Islamic). The term is then used to identify a particular and well-defined (even if broad) group of movements with common tenets. Movements such as *al-Dawa al-Salafiyya* in Egypt and *Ansar al-Sharia* in Libya are usually associated with the Salafi sphere. Both

have set up important welfare networks, but whereas the Alexandria-based *al-Dawa al-Salafiyya* agreed to enter the political realm with its political branch, *Hizb al-Nur*, the Benghazi-based *Ansar al-Sharia* refused to do so and even maintained a strong militia.

It is also interesting to note that Libyans themselves tend to differentiate between two main strains of Salafism. The first, called *al-salafiya al-ilmia* (scientific Salafism), is quieter and tends to uphold the belief that individuals do not have the right to rise up against an unjust ruler. The second current is *al-salafiya al-jihadiya*, the jihadi version of Salafism, which permits the use of force against an unjust ruler. Consequently, Salafists are not

necessarily jihadists. In Benghazi, for example, dozens of Salafists have been assassinated for their allegiance to Operation Dignity (*Amaliyyat al-Karama*).

There are also other Islamist forces which have relations with and influence these militias: for example, the MB, the Libyan Grand Mufti Sadikh al-Gharyani and the Loyalty to the Martyr's Bloc (*Kutlat al-Wafa al Shuhada*) in GNC. Al-Wafa included initially also a great many independents and was supposed to be the second version of the independents bloc, the original organisation having been dissolved after the Justice and Construction Party managed to break it up. But it was quickly taken over by Abdulrahman Swaihli from Misrata and former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (*Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyyah al-Muqatilah bi-Libya*, LIFG) members. Thereafter, the independents left. Now it is affiliated with various Islamist militias. On several occasions both the MB and the al-Wafa bloc resorted to militia forces to push through political agendas (e.g. the Political Isolation Law).<sup>111</sup> Initially, all Islamists planned to establish just one party, which was to include the MB, LIFG and other Salafists. But they decided to split into different parties in order to get more votes from the various streams although their funding sources constrained them to remain in one party.

لا إله إلا الله محمد رسول الله  
كتيبة أنصار الشريعة

Ansar al-Sharia flag

<sup>111</sup> Dr Monem Alyaser, interviews by the authors in May 2015.



Subsequently, the Justice and Construction Party, the Ummah Party, the Asala Party, Hizb Al Watan and others were founded.<sup>112</sup>

## The roots of the jihadist movement in Libya

The early 1980s saw Islamists' first attempts at resistance against Muammar Qaddafi. At that time the first jihadist cells tried to penetrate Libyan ranks but failed to make a real impact. A decade later, in the early 1990s, Libyans returning from the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan founded the LIFG. When they attempted an uprising against Qaddafi in the mid-1990s, they were crushed by security forces. Many fighters were killed; many others were captured and jailed in the Abu Slim maximum security prison. Others managed to escape abroad. One group escaped to the UK where they adopted a more moderate approach.

Another group moved to Sudan, then on to Pakistan and finally back to Afghanistan, where they came in contact with the Taliban and al-Qaeda. In November 2007, senior LIFG member Abu Laith al-Libi declared that his organisation had joined al-Qaeda, a claim that was furiously rejected by LIFG members in the UK. Subsequently, several Libyans climbed up the ranks of al-Qaeda. Abu Yahya became the chief ideologist of the terrorist organisation. Following the death of Osama Bin Laden, he was behind Ayman al-Zawahiri the number two leader of al-Qaeda. Al-Libi was killed in 2012 in an American drone strike in North Waziristan, Pakistan. Several other LIFG members were killed in Pakistan or Afghanistan. Others were captured and jailed for years, mostly in Guantanamo or—like Abdelhakim Belhadj—in Libya's Abu Slim Prison.

Many Libyan Islamists had been imprisoned (and frequently tortured) in the notorious Abu Slim Prison in Tripoli. This included members and leaders not only of the LIFG<sup>113</sup> but also of the MB<sup>114</sup> and from today's Ansar al-Sharia<sup>115</sup>

The prisoners from different Islamist groups got to know each other in jail, and the role of this common jail time in forging lasting friendships and alliances over the years cannot be overestimated.

In 2008–9 Saif al-Islam Qaddafi negotiated a reconciliation agreement with several of the imprisoned and exiled LIFG leaders. The talks were facilitated by Ali al-Sallabi, now one of

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Including Abdelhakim Belhadj (2004–10), Abdul-Hakim al-Hasadi (from Derna, 2002–10), Abu Sufyan bin Qumu (from Derna, 2007–10), Sami al-Saadi (from Tripoli, 2004–10), and Abdel Wahab Mohamed Qaid alias Abu Idris al-Libi (from Fezzan, 1995–2011). Several of these men had previously been jailed in Guantanamo

<sup>114</sup> For example, Mohamed Sawan (Misrata) and Dr Abdul-Latif Karmus (Tripoli).

<sup>115</sup> Including Mohammed al-Zahawi and Shaykh Nasir al-Tarshani.



the most influential clerics of Libya, and after their successful conclusion several hundred LIFG members were released, including Abdelhakim Belhadj. Only a very small number remained in jail, and these were released on 16 February 2011. However, some were arrested again in the wake of the revolution, and many former LIFG fighters joined the fight against the regime and took up key positions in several militias. Some leaders, like Belhadj, were in charge of distributing weapons received from Qatar. Not only did this ensure them major influence, but it also allowed them to allocate a major share to Islamists.

Belhadj and several others decided in March 2011 to rebrand the group the 'Libyan Islamic Movement' (al-Harakat al-Islamiya al-Libiya). Many of its members took up prominent roles within the government and several Islamist militias. Abdel Wahab Mohamed Qaid (alias Abu Idris al-Libi), the older brother of Abu Yahya al-Libi, was elected to the GNC and later became an important member of the al-Wafa bloc.<sup>116</sup> The former Deputy Emir and member of the Shura council of LIFG, Khalid al-Sharif, has been Deputy Defence Minister since January 2013 and is in this capacity still serving in the GNC's 'government' in Tripoli. Khalid al-Sharif was a Guantanamo inmate handed over to Libya in 2005, released in 2010, but arrested again at the wake of the revolution. After his release at the end of the revolution, he supported Belhadj's Tripoli Military Council. Later he was charged with building up the National Guard and Border Guards from former *thuwar*, who numbered in total (at least on paper) ten thousand fighters and were considered by some to be his personal militia. Al-Sharif is in charge of the prison in Tripoli where the former regime members are jailed.

Al-Qaeda was surprised by the outbreak of the revolution in Libya, but quickly tried—more or less successfully—to benefit from it. Abu Yahya al-Libi and al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri tried to motivate Libyans to capitalise on the uprising by stockpiling weapons and transforming Libya into a land of jihad. During the first weeks of the conflict, statements of support for the jihad cause in Libya came by senior members of the al-Qaeda leadership, including Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Yahya al-Libi and al-Attayatullah Libi.<sup>117</sup> However, this has not turned into attacks on Western targets but rather into the struggle against the regime.

Certain radical groups emerged during the conflict and during the first six months of 2012. In the first weeks of the revolution, the little-known group 'Islamic Emirate of Barqah' (the Arabic term for Cyrenaica), led by Abdelkarim al-Hasadi, became involved in kidnapping civilians and former members of Qaddafi's security forces. The group's name disappeared over the course of time. This was probably related to the Qaddafi's regime's attempts to

<sup>116</sup> Dr Monem Alyaser, interviews by the authors in May 2015.

<sup>117</sup> A. Lebovich and A. Zelin, 'Assessing Al-Qa'ida's Presence in Libya', CTC Sentinel, 5/3 (2012), pp. 14-18.



highlight the presence of Islamist fighters in Cyrenaica and in particular in Darnah<sup>118</sup> and as part of the effort of the *thumar*'s leadership to convince the international community that there were no members of al-Qaeda among the Libyan rebels. All of these groups stayed away from the media, recruiting and building up cells, blending in to ensure that the international community did not become aware of their presence. They started appearing systematically after the election of the GNC, at which time they carried out several attacks on Libyan institutions and Western targets. This included the attacks on the headquarters of the Committee of the Red Cross in Benghazi in May 2012 and on the US consulate in Benghazi in June 2012.

## Mapping the groups

### Ansar al-Sharia

The term 'Ansar al-Sharia' refers more to a collection of heterogeneous groups than to a single united group or a 'franchise organisation'. There is no chain of command whatsoever among its various wings in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. The main branches in Libya are located in Derna, Benghazi, Sirte (now merged with IS) and Sabratha. A smaller cell exists in Tripoli.<sup>119</sup> All of them, but especially the last two, have many Tunisian members and close connections to Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia.

The branches in both Benghazi and Derna have links with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and with Al Mourabitoun, which is led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar. A former AQIM commander who established his own jihadist group in 2013, Belmokhtar is responsible for the bloody In Amenas terrorist attack in Algeria in January 2013. According to some media reports, Belmokhtar was killed in June 2015 in the eastern city of Ajdabiya by an American airstrike. The US says Belmokhtar was targeted and the strike was 'successful' but did not confirm that Belmokhtar himself was killed. Ansar al-Sharia branches engage in severe human rights violations, are involved in the destruction of Sufi shrines and had a (probably leading) role in the 11 September 2012 terrorist attack on the US Mission in Benghazi. They are also very much involved in charitable (*da'wa*) activities.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> D. Cristiani, 'Between Electoral Politics and Global Jihad: Libya's Islamist Groups Consider New Options', Terrorism Monitor 10/15 (2012) accessed at [http://mlm.jamestown.org/feature-single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=39679&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=539&cHash=3e5808781b4942e4cb6b99d729ac9bac#.VbYh0fntIHw](http://mlm.jamestown.org/feature-single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=39679&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=539&cHash=3e5808781b4942e4cb6b99d729ac9bac#.VbYh0fntIHw) on 17 July 2015.

<sup>119</sup> The Qoudwati (charity) foundation allegedly belongs to Ansar al-Sharia.

<sup>120</sup> For more information on Ansar al-Sharia, see the first report in this volume: 'Competing Jihadist Organisations and Networks: Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Ansar al-Sharia in Libya' by Stefano Torelli and Arturo Varvelli.



## Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC)

Under heavy pressure from General Haftar's 'Operation Dignity', Benghazi's Islamist militias realised that closer coordination was necessary to avoid being defeated one by one. Therefore, on 20 June 2014, Libya Shield No.1, Ansar al-Sharia (the Benghazi branch), the 17 February Brigade, the Rafallah al-Sahati Brigade and several other groups established<sup>121</sup> the Benghazi Revolutionary Shura Council (Majlis Shura Thuwar Benghazi, BRSC; also translated 'Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries'), which was meant to be a loose 'umbrella organisation'. Other, smaller BRSC militias include the 319th Infantry Brigade, Free Libya Martyrs Brigade, Fakhri al-Sallabi Brigade, Zintan Martyrs Brigade and Jaysh al-Mujahidin. Ansar al-Sharia's leader, Mohammed al-Zahawi, became the official overall leader; Wissam bin Hamid from Libya Shield No. 1 was named military leader; and Jalal Makhzum from the Rafallah al-Sahati Brigade became a 'military commander'.<sup>122</sup> This consolidation allowed the Islamists to push General Haftar's forces out of Benghazi until October 2014, when the general launched a major counteroffensive. Currently, the BRSC holds only a few districts in central Benghazi (including Souq al-Hout, Assabri and Leithi) but several areas at the outskirts. It is unlikely that Haftar will be able to defeat the BRSC any time soon.

In summer 2014, radical Islamist militias in the greater Benghazi area numbered probably no more than 8,000 individuals. The groups recruit from various tribes all over northern Cyrenaica but in particular from the Murābtīn tribes (those are with some exceptions tribes from the lower class), the urban population of Benghazi and the greater Derna area. Because fighters are former *thuwar* (or claim to be), they are paid by the Central Bank of Libya, as are most of the other militias. Further support comes from Qatar and—allegedly—Turkey. Moreover, due to historical links and family relations, several fighters from Misrata reinforce the various groups of the BRSC but also operate in their own groups. Misrata is the location where many residents from Benghazi, including families of leaders and fighters of the BRSC, took refuge when the fighting escalated. After the increased intensity of fighting between militias from Misrata and IS in Sirte and the IS bomb attacks in Misrata there are significant tensions with the refugees and the BRSC. A part of the Misrata population accuses them of supporting IS, and this is likely not entirely wrong. Finally, various BRSC brigades are supported by a large number of foreign fighters from various Arab countries (including Sudan and Tunisia), several of them experts in urban combat.

<sup>121</sup> AFP, 'Splits Emerge Between Libyan Islamists and Jihadists,' Yahoo News, 18 August 2014, accessed at <http://news.yahoo.com/splits-emerge-between-libyan-islamists-jihadists-183000425.html> on 31 May 2015.

<sup>122</sup> A. Y. Zelin, 'The Rise and Decline of Ansar al-Sharia in Libya', Hudson Institute, 6 April 2015, accessed at <http://www.hudson.org/research/11197-the-rise-and-decline-of-ansar-al-sharia-in-libya> on 31 May 2015.



Their tactics include small-scale raids and the use of suicide bombers. Since spring 2015 the BRSC has extended its area of operations to the Green Mountains (al-Jabal al-Akhar) and along the coast as far as Ra's al Hilal. Logistic support for the besieged Islamists is provided via the Gulf of Sidra, and smaller ships and boats setting out from Misrata. Wounded fighters are evacuated to this town and, when necessary, further on to Turkey.

Libya Shield No. 1 was established as part of Libya Shield East in 2012. The unit is commanded by the thirty-seven-year-old Wissam Bin Hamid (allegedly) from Derna.<sup>123</sup> At the beginning of the revolution, Wissam and his brother Hussain formed the '17 February Coalition' from several subgroups (this organisation is not to be confused with the 17 February Brigade). It consisted initially of Islamists and other fighters. In May 2011 the Coalition formed together with the 17 February Brigade and the Umar al-Mukhtar Brigade an umbrella organisation called the 'Gathering of Revolutionary Companies' (Tajammu' Sarayat al-Thuwwar, GRC). Wissam Bin Hamid proved himself a tactically skilled and charismatic leader. He was once considered an ally by the Americans, providing security in Benghazi, but he did not intervene during the 11 September 2012 terrorist attack. There were even rumours that Bin Hamid was an al-Qaeda leader in Libya, but these were almost certainly false. He has declared his support for the MB's Justice and Construction Party more than once and has a good relationship with Ansar al-Sharia. When Libya Shield No. 1 was deployed by the government to Kufra as a peacekeeping force in summer 2012, the brigade sided with the Arab Al Zuwayya tribe and fought against the Toubou. In June 2013 demonstrators called for the disbandment of Libya Shield No. 1 in front of their Benghazi camp. The situation turned violent, and at least 31 protesters were killed and more than 80 wounded.<sup>124</sup>

Before he launched 'Operation Dignity', General Haftar reached out to Libya Shield No.1 and other groups and asked them to stay out of the war on Ansar al-Sharia. They all refused because at that time they had been heavily influenced by Salafi jihadists.<sup>125</sup>

Benghazi's Ansar al-Sharia branch was officially formed in June 2012. Its first members came mostly from the brigades Abu Obayda bin al-Jarah, Matlik, Rafallah al-Sahati, and 17 February. The main base was in the Quwarsha district until October 2014. Ansar al-Sharia Benghazi is a key player within the BRSC and on the frontlines although since the death of the group's alleged commander, Mohammed al-Zahawi,<sup>126</sup> there has been a tendency to merge with IS. One of Ansar al-Sharia Benghazi's remaining important field commanders

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<sup>123</sup> According to other sources he was born in Misrata.

<sup>124</sup> C. Stephen, 'Army Chief Quits after Militia Kills Dozens in Benghazi,' The Guardian, 9 June 2013, accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/09/libya-shield-benghazi-clash-militia> on 28 May 2015.

<sup>125</sup> Dr Monem Alyaser, interviews by the authors in May 2015.

<sup>126</sup> He was seriously wounded in September 2014 and died in January 2015.



is Mohamed Al-Dersi (also known as 'Al-Nus'). In 2007 he was jailed for life in Jordan for plotting to blow up the Amman airport; however, he was exchanged for the kidnapped Jordanian ambassador to Libya in May 2014. After almost a year of heavy fighting, there are still several hundred Ansar al-Sharia jihadists active in Benghazi.

The 17 February Brigade (also called the '17 February Martyrs Brigade') was founded in Benghazi at the beginning of the revolution by Fawzi Bukatif, an oil project manager at the Arabian Gulf Oil Company (AGOCO) (for 38 years) and an MB member from Benghazi. When the brigade was first formed, it mostly consisted of mainstream young people who had no affiliation to the MB or to LIFG.<sup>127</sup> The 17 February Brigade was funded by the Ministry of Defence. Until General Haftar's counteroffensive in Benghazi, it was the best-equipped militia in eastern Libya. It was made up of at least 12 subunits and ran dedicated training facilities. At its peak the brigade had 1,500 to 3,000 fighters and deployed tanks and heavy artillery.

After the revolution it was quickly taken over by extremists because most mainstream members went home back to their former jobs.<sup>128</sup> Several fighters moved to Syria to join the uprising against the Assad regime, and some of them allegedly came into contact with radical groups like the al-Nusra Front and IS. In Libya the brigade had been deployed to Kufra as a peacekeeping force (as had Libya Shield No. 1) and provided security for the US consulate in Benghazi until the 11 September 2012 terrorist attack. Many citizens of Benghazi considered the brigade, which has always maintained close connections with Ansar al-Sharia, to be outside of the official security structures. This, together with arrests made by the brigade and its alleged involvement in assassinations, led to several clashes in front of the 17 February Brigade's main bases, resulting in a number of killed and wounded.

For quite some time Fawzi Bukatif was an important power broker for business deals in the greater Benghazi area. In mid-2013 he became Libya's ambassador to Uganda. It is difficult to assess how much influence he still has. It is unclear who makes up the current tactical leadership of the 17 February Brigade, but it includes former LIFG members. The current commander is probably Ismail al-Sallabi. The brigade had occupied extensive barracks in the centre of the Benghazi but was evicted by Operation Dignity in fall 2014.

The Rafallah al-Sahati Brigade was commanded by Ismail al-Sallabi, the more radical brother of the Muslim cleric Ali al-Sallabi and a former Abu Slim Prison inmate. Initially a subunit of the 17 February Brigade, it was named after Ismail's friend Rafallah al-Sahati,

<sup>127</sup> Dr Monem Alyaser, interviews by the authors in May 2015.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.



who was killed in action on 17 March 2011.<sup>129</sup> The brigade was probably responsible for the murder of Abdel Fatah Younis, the commander-in-chief of the Free Libyan Army, in summer 2011. However, because the assassination was very well planned and executed, the organisers have yet to be identified. As of 2013 the brigade had up to 1,000 members. After Ismail al-Sallabi replaced Fawzi Bukatif as leader of the larger 17 February Brigade, the leadership of the Rafallah al-Sahati Brigade was taken over by Mohamad al-Gharabi, another former inmate of Abu Slim Prison. The military leader of the brigade is Salahadeen Bin Omran. In September 2012 the 17 February and Rafallah al-Sahati Brigades officially became Libya Shield No. 7. But other than providing some kind of legitimisation and regular payments for the *thuwar*, this change had no real impact.

In summary it can be said that the BRSC has military capabilities sufficient to deny General Haftar's Operation Dignity full control over Libya's second-largest city for the foreseeable future. Even if Haftar proves able to seize the remaining quarters of Benghazi and the BRSC is driven underground, it has a sufficient number of experienced fighters to conduct a successful guerrilla warfare campaign against the security forces. In this case it is likely that it will increasingly attack targets outside the greater Benghazi area, including the hydrocarbon industry. It cannot be expected that these radical Islamist militias will disarm voluntarily.

## Groups in Derna

The Derna Islamic Youth Shura Council (Majlis Shura al-Islam, MSSI) made its first public appearance on 4 April 2014<sup>130</sup> and subsequently took over major parts of the city. On 22 June 2014 it released a declaration of support for IS. On 3 October it declared its territory a part of IS and named it Wilayat Darnah.<sup>131</sup> MSSI enforced Sharia through 'police forces' and judiciary powers. This included strict gender segregation in schools and universities. Punishment for lawbreakers included summary executions (beheadings), amputations and public floggings.<sup>132</sup>

Several smaller groups, like the Lions of Libya, subsequently declared their support for or allegiance to IS.

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<sup>129</sup> M. Fitzgerald, 'Finding their Place', in P. Cole and B. McQuinn (eds.), *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), 191.

<sup>130</sup> TRAC (Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium), 'Islamic Youth Shura Council,' accessed at <http://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/islamic-youth-shura-council> on 27 May 2015.

<sup>131</sup> A. Y. Zelin, 'The Islamic State's First Colony in Libya,' The Washington Institute, 10 October 2014, accessed at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-first-colony-in-libya> on 27 May 2015.

<sup>132</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Libya: Extremists Terrorizing Derna Residents', 27 November 2014, accessed at <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/11/27/libya-extremists-terrorizing-derna-residents> on 27 May 2015.



In March 2014 Ansar al-Sharia in Derna was targeted by a retaliation campaign by relatives and tribes of the victims of the jihadist assassinations in the town. At least 14 members were killed, including leading members. With the raise of IS, Ansar al-Sharia in Derna has lost prominence. Many of its members probably switched to MSSl. Abu Sufian Ibrahim Ahmed Hamuda Bin Qumu, a former driver for Osama Bin Laden and Guantanamo inmate, is frequently named as the leader of Ansar al-Sharia in Derna. However, given his low rank in al-Qaeda, this remains unconfirmed: he may be covering for the real leader.



Extremists of the so-called Islamic State

Apart from Ansar al-Sharia and IS are several other radical Islamist militias active in Derna. Probably the most important one is the Abu Slim Martyrs Brigade. It was founded in spring 2011 by former LIFG member Salim Dirby. Its current leader is probably founding member Abdul-Hakim al-Hasadi, an Afghanistan veteran who fought for the Taliban and was later imprisoned in Guantanamo. Although there was no formal alliance with Ansar al-Sharia until December 2014, leading members of the Abu

Slim Martyrs Brigade spoke out in support of this organisation on several occasions. After the establishment of MSSl, there were frequent clashes between the two groups, resulting in several deaths and many wounded. On 7 October 2014 the Abu Slim Martyrs Brigade declared that it would never pledge an oath of allegiance to anyone outside Libya.

On 12 December 2014 Ansar al-Sharia in Derna, the Abu Slim Martyrs Brigade and the Islamic Army of Libya, another Islamist militia led by Yusuf Tahir, formed the Shura Council of Derna Mujahideen (Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin Derna). Salim Dirby became the overall leader; Sufian Bin Qumu and Yusuf Tahir are the military leaders.<sup>133</sup> Whereas the Shura Council of Derna Mujahideen is actively participating in the fight against Operation Dignity (e.g. with raids on Labraq Air Base next to Al Bayda and with attacks on checkpoints in the Green Mountains), it condemns IS bomb attacks on civilian targets (such as the Al Qubah car bombs). In June the Shura Council of Derna Mujahideen declared 'holy war' on the local IS affiliate after one of their senior leaders was killed by masked gunmen as a result of a dispute about a decree that IS made in Derna banning the Tarweeh Prayer during Ramadan. This set off clashes between the rival jihadi groups that left more than 20 people dead on both sides. The Shura Council accused IS fighters of 'tyranny and criminality' and vowed to wage 'holy war against them until none of them are left'. It also called on residents to rise up against the extremist group. The ensuing clashes killed several IS militants and

<sup>133</sup> Zelin, 'The Rise and Decline'.



from the Shura Council, including Salim Dirby. According to recent news reports,<sup>134</sup> IS was widely evicted from Derna.

It seems that both IS and the Shura Council of Derna Mujahideen are increasingly active in the west of Derna on the coast and in the Green Mountains. Prior to the clashes the common objective was to threaten Labraq Airport and Al Beida to force General Haftar to withdraw forces from Benghazi in order to protect al Beida. It is highly unlikely that the general will be able to bring the situation in Derna under control without significant help from outside Libya.

### Other groups in Cyrenaica

The brotherhood-in-arms from the revolution retains particular importance in Cyrenaica. A good example is the GRC, established as an umbrella organisation for the 17 February Brigade, the Umar al-Mukhtar Brigade and the 17 February Coalition. The leadership council included three people from each of these groups and Fawzi Bukatif from the 17 February Brigade as the overall leader. The Umar al-Mukhtar Brigade was founded in the early days of the revolution in Ajdabiya and Benghazi by Bu Hliqa, Hassan al-Hamr and Urwa (who was killed near Ajdabiya in April 2011).<sup>135</sup> Initially the group numbered 350 to 400, including defected military personnel and former LIFG fighters. Over the months it became one of the larger brigades in the east, numbering more than 1,200 *thumar* from all over northern Cyrenaica.

The Shura Council of the Revolutionaries in Ajdabiya consists mainly of members of the Al Zuwayya tribe. They are in opposition to Ibrahim Jadhan, his Petroleum Facility Guards, the Al Magharba tribe and the small local Toubou community. The Al Zuwayya and the Al Magharba tribes are in Ajdabiya and about equal in size.

### Libya Dawn coalition

Libya Dawn is a coalition of militias from Misrata, Tripoli and other cities, mostly in northern Tripolitania. It has a mixed background. This includes Libya Shield West; all militias from Misrata; militias under the former Deputy Defence Minister and LIFG member Khalid al-Sharif; a militia from the Abu Slim district in Tripoli led by Abdelghani al-Kikli; the Nawasi Brigade led by Abdelraouf Kara; the Libyan Revolutionaries Operations Room led by Shaaban Hadiyyah; other militias from Tripoli; and the Janzour Knights Brigade. There are also forces from Khoms (on the coast between Misrata and Tripoli); Massallata (about 25 km west of Khoms); Gharyan (in the Jabal Nafousa Mountains, about 80 km south of

<sup>134</sup> M. Eljarh, 'A Victory over the Islamic State in Libya', Foreign Policy, 24 June 2015, accessed at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/24/a-victory-over-the-islamic-state-in-libya/> on 20 July 2015.

<sup>135</sup> Fitzgerald, 'Finding their Place,' 190.



Tripoli); Zawiya and Sabratha (on the coastal road to Tunisia); and the Amazigh towns Zuawara (on the coast), Nalut and Jadu (in the Jabal Nafousa). Only a very small number of these can be regarded as 'radical Islamist militia' in the meaning explained above. Libya Dawn is led not by politicians but by military leaders. Among the most important of these are Khalid Sharif and Salah Badi, a former air force pilot, director of the Military Intelligence and GNC member from Misrata.

### Misrata

The Misrata militias are the most powerful single military force in Libya. At the end of 2011 their numbers reached approximately 40,000, including reserves (22,000 fighters in 236 brigades or battalions and 18,000 for logistics and other support).<sup>136</sup> The largest number has been 'legitimised' as part of the 'Libyan Shield Center' or as part of the Libyan Army. They are now the key element of Libya Dawn. Militias from Misrata also guard the GNC. There is no central leadership for all the militias in Misrata. Their umbrella organisation, the Misrata Revolutionary Union, is not a military command. Although it cannot be considered 'radical Islamist', the Misrata Military Council has, for various reasons, been allied with the Islamists in the GNC. Moreover, although individuals like Salah Badi are 'extremists' (as are various others on all sides in the civil war), they are not Islamists. Nevertheless, within the various brigades there are a certain—though relatively small—number of individuals who could be regarded 'radical Islamists'. A few have left their brigades to join IS.

The Libyan Al Farouk Brigade has roots in Misrata, where it was established by extremists and former LIFG fighters. It is now active in several towns in northern Tripolitania, including Misrata, Tripoli, Sirte and Zawia. The name 'Al Farouk Brigade' is widely used in the 'jihadi world', including Syria and Algeria, where it is one of the strongest remaining elements of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The name is derived from Omar bin al-Khattab, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad and the second caliph, whose title was 'Al Farouk' (Distinguisher between truth and falsehood). An early commander of the Libyan group was Touhami Bu Zayan, a former LIFG member who distinguished himself during the fighting in Sirte in October 2011. He was appointed by Ali Zeidan as the Deputy Defence Minister responsible for training and was in charge of organising the 'General Purpose Force' program. Allegedly many of the trainees he sent abroad returned to fight in Benghazi with the BRSC and IS.<sup>137</sup> The Al Farouk harasses 'non-Islamic' schools, shops, and cafés. Their fighters are frequently in the forefront of the combat against the Zintanis, but they are also active in Benghazi, where they fight shoulder to shoulder with local Farouk members, the BRSC and

<sup>136</sup> B. McQuinn, 'History's Warriors', in P. Cole and B. McQuinn (eds.), *The Libyan Revolution* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), 251.

<sup>137</sup> Dr Monem Alyaser, interviews by the authors in May 2015.



IS. Their leader in Benghazi is Shâykh Jalal Makhzoum. In August 2013 Ahmed al-Tir (also known as 'Abu Ali'), an Al Farouk brigade commander from Derna, was killed in Sirte. A few months before his death, al-Qaeda had designated him 'Emir of Sirte'. After his death the Al Farouk Brigade in Sirte changed its name to Ansar a-Sharia and later became part of IS.

Another Mistrita-based group, the Nosoor Brigade, was responsible for the 'Gargour Massacre' in Tripoli on 5 November 2013. It has Islamist leanings but is certainly not a core radical Islamist brigade. Many of its members are very young and did not even fight in the revolution.

### Tripoli and Suburbs

The first leader of the Tripoli Military Council (TMC) was the former LIFG emir, Abdelhakim Belhadj. He is from the Tripoli district Zanatha, which is next to Souk al-Jouma. Several former LIFG members were part of its leadership. The TMC received substantial support from Qatar. When Belhadj resigned and founded the conservative Islamist Hizb Al Watan Party, he was replaced by Issa Bader. The TMC has widely disappeared as a formal body because most of its fighters have been absorbed by the SSC and other local militias, and several others moved on to fight in Syria and Iraq. After the GNC was attacked in March 2014 by armed protesters with an anti-Islamist agenda, Issa Bader and the TMC were tasked by President Nuri Abu Sahmain with securing Tripoli against 'illegitimate' armed groups.<sup>138</sup> But Bader was not able to assume a prominent role thereafter, and the council retained very limited influence. The TMC cannot be considered a 'radical Islamist militia' in the sense of the definition above. Nevertheless, it is close to Belhadj's Hizb Al Watan, the MB and its Justice and Construction Party.

The Libya Revolutionaries Operations Room (LROR) was created in June 2013 by President Nuri Abu Sahmain from a group of former members of Islamist militias, especially from Souk al-Jouma and Misrata. Officially under the Ministry of Defence, the president himself was initially the commander-in-chief. He transferred 140 million Libyan dinars to the LROR and a further 900 million Libyan dinars (\$750 million) to an unknown group, which is supposed to be Libya Shield. No one knows where this money ended up, but part of it could have gone to the LROR.<sup>139</sup> Abu Sahmain tasked the LROR with providing security for the

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<sup>138</sup> J. Pack, K. Mezran and M. Eljarh, 'Libya's Faustian Bargains: Breaking the Appeasement Cycle', Atlantic Council, 5 May 2014, 30, accessed at <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/libya-s-faustian-bargains-breaking-the-appeasement-cycle> on 30 May 2015.

<sup>139</sup> Dr Monem Alyaser, interviews by the authors in May 2015.



capital.<sup>140</sup> On 6 October 2013 he appointed Sheik Shaaban Hadiya, a Salafist scholar from Zawiya, as a new commander.

The LROR is a strong supporter of the MB and was used by them in their political disputes with their rivals. The militia was involved in the abduction of Prime Minister Ali Zeidan on 4 October 2013. Thereafter, the GNC stripped it of its role in guarding the capital. A branch of the LROR, Benghazi's Revolutionaries Operations Room, was established in Benghazi in late 2013 to deal with the escalating security situation but did not rise to significance as such. It included members of the 17 February Brigade, Rafallah al-Sahati Brigade and Umar al-Mukhtar Brigade, who did not cancel their membership to their own brigades. In 2014 the LROR was involved in the Battle for Tripoli Airport.

The Special Deterrent Force (Quwwat al-Rada'a al-Khasa, 'Rada Force') is led by Haitham al-Tajouri and aligned with the Islamists in Tripoli. As part of an effort to demobilise or legitimise militias, it was officially recognised as a part of the police force by the Ali Zeidan government. Al-Tajouri was appointed police captain.

The stronghold of the Nawasi Brigade (also known as the 'Crime Combat Unit') is Souk al-Jouma, but it has members from all over the capital. The conservative district of Souk al-Jouma is a force provider for several larger militias but also the hub of many smaller militias, some of which could be considered radical Islamist groups. The Nawasi militia, which is technically under the Ministry of the Interior and was previously part of the SSC, has its headquarters at the Mitiga Airport. It numbers probably no more than 500 fighters. Its leader is the Salafist Abdelraouf Kara, and its commanders include Mohamed Joumeh and other Salafists. The brigade has been involved in the fight against the numerous drug gangs but is also infamous for its actions to impose Sharia-conforming behaviour. Its members arrest homosexuals and raid clandestine alcohol parties and even Christmas or New Year's celebrations, which are deemed by them 'un-Islamic'. Moreover, they have destroyed several Sufi mosques and shrines. In January 2013 six civilians were killed during protests in front of the brigade's headquarters. On several occasions since summer 2013, they have been involved in clashes with Zintan brigades. Abdelraouf Kara himself is at odds with IS, which has frequently denounced him as a *murtad* (apostate). Nevertheless, it is likely that several members of the Nawasi Brigade will eventually join IS. The Nawasi Brigade is allied with the larger Special Deterrent Force, and both have several weapons and supply depots in the rural Wadi al-Rabi in the southern suburbs of Tripoli.

Another radical Islamist militia in Tripoli is Abdelghani al-Kikli's group from the Abu Slim district. The Salafist Al-Kikli (also known as 'Ghnaïwa'), who also heads Abu Slim's Military

<sup>140</sup> F. Wehrey, Ending Libya's Civil War: Reconciling Politics, Rebuilding Security, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2014, 15, accessed at [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/ending\\_libya\\_civ\\_war.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/ending_libya_civ_war.pdf) on 30 May 2015.



Council and the district's SSC, is regarded as one of the most brutal militia leaders in the capital. His group numbers about 800 fighters and runs its own private prison. Their main area of operations is their home district, Abu Slim, and neighbouring Hadhba. Al-Kikli maintains close contacts with certain militias from Misrata and with former LIFG members. The former leader of this militia and the Abu Slim Military Council was Salah al-Burki, a former LIFG member. In March 2015 he was killed in a fight with Zintani militias in the south of Tripoli near Aziziyah.

## Other Tripolitania

The Janzoor Knights (Fursan Janzoor) are a local, Islamist-leaning militia in the Tripoli suburb Janzoor. Their main enemy is the Wirshfana tribe that lives in an area stretching from al Aziziyah to Zawia.

Various Zawiya militias are organised within the Zawiya branch of the Revolutionaries Room of Libya. They defend the town against the Noble Tribal Army of Operation Dignity. Mohammed al-Kilani's group is probably one of the most important militias in Zawiya. He is a Salafist and former GNC member with close contacts to LROR leader Sheik Shaaban Hadiya. Al-Kilani, who commanded the Zawiya Martyrs Brigade during the revolution, was probably involved in the kidnapping of Prime Minister Zeidan. His militia has always been at the forefront of the war against the neighbouring Wirshfana tribe.

## Situation in the Fezzan

The Fezzan is not the current focus of radical Islamist militias. The majority of the militias there are organised on a tribal basis and are quite conservative. AQIM uses Fezzan not as a 'combat zone' but as a safe haven. Certain areas close to the borders with Algeria and Niger serve as logistics zones but also for resting while combat operations are being conducted in the neighbouring countries. In fall 2011 several Libyan AQIM members demanded of their emir, Abdelmalek Droukdel, the establishment of a 'combat zone' in Fezzan. Droukdel categorically refused to do so, because he obviously considered the availability of a safe haven more important. For the time being there have been no major AQIM attacks in Libya. But if these terrorists are hunted down on Libyan soil, revenge attacks on the hydrocarbon industry in the region are very likely to occur.

## What future for radical Islamist militias?

The present influence of former LIFG members and the MB remains relevant. Several members of the MB and former LIFG members had or still have assumed senior positions within the GNC, its former governments and its security apparatus. It is widely believed



that the Ministry of the Interior has been under the control of Islamists since its establishment after the revolution. Former members of the LIFG are still well connected today and occupy influential positions within Libya Dawn and several Islamist militias. Ali Zeidan gave them two of the most important jobs in the Ministry of Defence.<sup>141</sup> The MB, its Justice and Construction Party, and the al-Wafa bloc control the rump-GNC in Tripoli and the 'National Salvation Government' of 'prime minister' Khalifa al-Ghwell.<sup>142</sup>

The MB could be increasingly radicalised and perhaps form—together with the al-Wafa bloc—one entity with the radical Islamist militias. In this entity the MB and al-Wafa would be in charge of political matters.

It is unlikely that radical Islamist militia leaders will take orders from any politician who is ideologically opposed to them. Most reject any kind of Western-style democracy and consider such forms of government 'un-Islamic'. They believe themselves the 'real defenders of the (Islamic) revolution'.

Many young Libyans are—not surprisingly—very disappointed with the developments after the revolution. They have the perception that the achievements of the revolution are being lost and feel abandoned by the West, which helped them get rid of the Qaddafi regime and 'disappeared' thereafter. The radical Islamists offer themselves as an alternative to Western-leaning politicians.

Social factors still play a minor role in Libya, but the perception that oil income is being distributed unevenly is fuelling discontent. Crime and corruption seem to be out of control. In the eyes of many young people, the only ones sincerely taking on these problems are the radical Islamists. The radical Islamists from the Murâbitîn tribes feel disfranchised again by the noble Sa'adi tribes that ruled them for centuries and want to break up the old hierarchies.

The World Food Programme (WFP) has delivered the first tranche of food assistance to the east of Libya, where thousands of refugee families will receive supplies. The WFP reports that the food assistance is enough to assist about 50,000 refugees for a month. The organisation 'plan[s] to support a total of 243,000 internally displaced people in Libya with life-saving food assistance over the next six months'.<sup>143</sup>

In economic terms the situation is grim. All major infrastructure projects which were in progress when the war erupted—and many were in their final phase—have been suspended and looted as foreign investors who flocked to Libya before 2011 have left the country with no prospect of returning any time soon. Libya faces bankruptcy because its only source

<sup>141</sup> Dr Monem Alyaser, interviews by the authors in May 2015.

<sup>142</sup> Al-Ghwell is from Misrata.

<sup>143</sup> Albawaba News, 'Food Aid from the UN Delivered to Libya for the First Time this Year', 5 June 2015.



of hard currency, oil production, has fallen to a quarter of what it was four years ago. This appears to be the perfect economic situation for the rise of IS and other radical militias devoted to dawa efforts.<sup>144</sup>

Indeed, it is precisely their success that makes organisations like IS very attractive for many young Muslims in the Middle East.

## Conclusion

Libya plays an important role in the strategic plans of global jihadists. The geostrategically important location and its natural resources provide ideal opportunities for further expansion of the Salafi jihadists' sphere - and they will do their best to take control of the country.

Due to its success, its modern propaganda apparatus and its financial resources, IS is growing in popularity with many domestic radical Islamist militias in North Africa. This attracts volunteers for the war in Iraq and Syria but also for the fight at home. As a consequence, an increasing number of terrorist organisations are pledging allegiance to IS and its caliph and act as franchise enterprises under the IS flag. Most radical Islamist militias in Libya share the same goal and differ only on the methods and about who should lead them. Despite the setback in Derna, the success of IS on the battlefields around Sirte as well as its increasingly important role in the fight in Benghazi will attract not only additional foreign fighters but an ever-increasing number of domestic radical Islamist groups. Moreover, it is quite likely that the BRSC and other radical Islamist militias in Cyrenaica, just like the Al Farouk Brigade in Sirte, will ultimately join forces with IS and fight together despite differences about the methods applied and acceptance of non-Libyan leaders.

The Misrata militias could suffer some kind of erosion if the rise of IS continues. This will occur if the city is not the objective of a major direct ground offensive by this terrorist organisation in the near future and if IS focuses its military activities solely on Operation Dignity. In fact, IS will likely launch its next offensive against the oil harbours in the eastern Gulf of Sirte. This offers them several advantages: they would avoid a showdown with Misrata for the time being; fighting against Operation Dignity would bring them (even) more sympathy from Libya Dawn fighters (including those from Misrata); they would drag part of General Haftar's forces away from Benghazi; and they would be able to interrupt a major part of Libya's oil exports (which would in turn increase the pressure on the House of Representatives and GNC).

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<sup>144</sup> M. Fetouri, 'What Did Libyans Gain from the Revolution?', Al-Monitor, 24 February 2015, accessed at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/libya-after-revolution-social-economy-political-gaddafi.html#ixzz3cYwF3s5m> on 20 July 2015.



In June 2015 five people were killed and eight wounded outside Misrata in a suicide bombing for which IS claimed responsibility. The Tripoli interior minister described IS as 'cowardly terrorists', and the Tripoli government announced it was planning new moves to fight the extremist group. This new confrontation between the IS branch in Sirte and Misrata militias - if it really happens - could reshape the security and the political panorama in the near future.

In conclusion, some 'Islamist' militias constitute a potential recruitment basin for Islamic State. Others seem to form a sort of bulwark against its expansion.









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EXPLOITATION

ESSAY 4



# THE EXPLOITATION OF MIGRATION ROUTES TO EUROPE



## ESSAY 4

# THE EXPLOITATION OF MIGRATION ROUTES TO EUROPE

## Human Trafficking Through Areas of Libya Affected by Fundamentalism

Nancy Porsia



The phenomenon of migrant flows from Libya to Europe dates back to the mid-1990s. Since then Europe has been committed to the resolution of the security questions arising as a result of the arrival of irregular migrants from Libya. The former Gaddafi regime implemented the 'diplomacy of frontiers' policy, which controlled and limited the migratory flow from Libya.<sup>145</sup> Since the 2011 revolutions across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the fall of various decades-long regimes has led to enduring instability in the region, which has caused a significant increase in the number of people fleeing to Europe.

In Libya the lack of controls and the fragmentation of central power into local potentates have led to a dramatic increase in human trafficking. Libya has been confirmed as the main route for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, the Horn of Africa and neighbouring countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, as well as those from Syria and Bangladesh. In addition to the gradual increase in migrants heading to Europe across the Mediterranean Sea, today the migratory flow includes a new element: the infiltration of terrorist groups into Europe.

Following the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in the MENA region since mid-2014, the flow of migrants has presented the international community, and primarily the EU, with the additional challenge of managing the security problems caused by this phenomenon.



Although these concerns are justified, they should be analysed in the wider context of international relations and the resolution of conflicts in the migrants' areas of origin and the transit countries where the network of human trafficking is active. Overall, the management of migration is a much bigger challenge for weak and failing states than for advanced industrial states.

This is the case in Libya. The most relevant challenges are the failure of the process of democratic transition after the ousting of former dictator Gaddafi in 2011; the sudden expansion of Islamic fundamentalist groups, including the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (IS), also known by the Arabic acronym DAESH; and the massive influx of migrants in transit to Europe.

Indeed, the massive flow of migrants in post-revolutionary Libya represents a threat to national stability, especially given the fragility of the state-building process. The presence of massive numbers of immigrants without legal papers undermines the demography of the country, considering the small current actual population of less than 6 million;<sup>146</sup> increases the risk of epidemics such as Ebola; and has the potential to cause an increase in crime. However, the spiral of violence that has swept the country since the outbreak of the ongoing civil war in July 2014 has left little room for the establishment of national institutions to counter illegal migration.

Since July 2014 opinion in the country has become polarised between the two rival armed factions, the loose coalition Libya Dawn (Fajr Libya) and Dignity (Karama). Libya Dawn's stronghold was the city of Misrata and it supported the Tripoli-based Congress, run by a Muslim Brotherhood majority. The Dignity coalition is headed by Khalifa Haftar, a former general in Gaddafi's army who defected and lived in the US for 20 years. He took on the role of a revolutionary commander in 2011 and, since May 2014, has been committed to fighting Islamic fundamentalist groups in the eastern region of Cyrenaica. Haftar is supported by the new parliament that has its seat in the eastern city of Tobruk.

While the two rival factions were fighting each other across the country, the extremist groups gained ground and widely spread till they getting rid of the groups linked to Al Qaeda and its affiliated Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG).

As early as autumn 2014, the city of Derna—a historic stronghold for al-Qaeda in the country, even in the days of Gaddafi—was declared a 'Province of the Islamic State' and pledged allegiance to the Caliphate of al-Baghdadi in Iraq. However, the presence of IS in the city, which is close to the Egyptian border, was perceived as a marginal phenomenon from the perspective of international security management, including European migration policy. In fact the Italian Navy-led rescue operation Mare Nostrum, which saved over 30,000 lives,

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<sup>146</sup> According to a spokesman for the Libyan Interior Ministry in an interview in June 2014.



started in October of 2013 and ended in December 2014, showing any concern about an eventual infiltration of the human trafficking by the terroristic groups

Concerns were first raised in February 2015, following the release of video footage by IS showing the beheading of Christians in the town of Sirte, the hometown of Gaddafi, in the Gulf of Sirte. In the video, the terrorists announced 'the invasion' of Italy by Islamic fundamentalist groups via the Mediterranean Sea (see below).

However the declaration of the Province of Tripoli in Sirt on February 2015 led the members of Misrata elected in the House of Representatives (HoR), the Tobruk based parliament, to oppose the General National Congress in Tripoli, and Misrata forces started to fight IS in Sirt and set at the United Nations led National Accord dialogue as third part and the coalition Libya Dawn fell apart on June 2015.

Since then, Tripoli and Tobruk based authorities have been discrediting each other over their involvement in human trafficking and links to terrorism. General Haftar accuses his opponents of being involved in human trafficking and using it to channel terrorists straight into Europe. On the other side, the Tripoli-based Congress accuses Haftar of deliberately allowing large numbers of migrants through Libya's eastern borders and moving them into the western region in order to highlight Libya Dawn's militias' involvement in human trafficking to the international community. In an interview with the authors, Colonel Reda Issa, commander of the central sector of the Libyan coastguard, responsible for 660 kilometres of shoreline from Sirte to Al Khoms, noted that, 'The border between Egypt and Libya is open. The Egyptians are there, but the Libyan authorities have disappeared for five months.'<sup>147</sup>

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt supports the faction in Tobruk and General Haftar, with the aim of weakening the Muslim Brotherhood's bloc in rows with Western forces. According to the authorities based in western Libya, el-Sisi and General Haftar have been facilitating the passage of migrants into Libya through the Egyptian border in order to increase the number of migrant boats then leaving from the territories controlled by the rival faction.

For both sides, it is now difficult to establish what is or is not propaganda, as both rival factions are aiming to obtain international recognition as the legitimate authority in Libya and thus sign cooperation agreements with the EU. However aside from the rivalries among the factions on the battlefield, the main outcome of the division of the national institutions into two rival factions is that the Central Bank of Libya, the institute in charge of national assets such as oil revenues, has frozen government budgets. At the moment only the salaries of employees of the public administration are being paid. As a result the identification centres

<sup>147</sup> Authors' interview with Reda Issa, Commander of the central sector of the Libyan coastguard, Misrata, Libya, March 2015.



for migrants—as the detention centres are called—as well as the Libyan coastguard, are operating without funding.

## **The flow of migrants through Libya in the aftermath of the revolution**

According to data from the Italian Ministry of the Interior, the fighting in 2011 caused 62,692 immigrants to set off from Libyan shores. More than two million seasonal workers in Libya, mostly Egyptians and Tunisians, were evacuated from the country through repatriation programmes. Hundreds of thousands of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and the Horn of Africa, suspected of fighting as mercenaries for Gaddafi and therefore persecuted by the revolutionary forces, poured into refugee camps in Tunisia.

With the end of fighting and the start of the democratic transition process in 2012, seasonal workers returned to Libya, with their numbers reaching pre-revolution rates. Moreover, migrants heading to Europe began to flow into the North African country in order to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Significant numbers of Syrians joined the broad array of irregular migrants living in Libya. However many Syrians, as well as the majority of migrants with no valid documents, arrived in oil-rich Libya to take advantage of local job opportunities rather than as a stopover en route to Europe. In fact, in 2012, the flow of migrants from Libya declined sharply, with just 13,267 migrants arriving in Italy.

In the course of 2013, the deterioration of security in post-revolutionary Libya affected the living conditions of migrants in the country: frequent domestic robberies, the confiscation of documents such as passports, raids and kidnappings for ransom pushed them to leave the country. Libya switched from being a destination to being a transit-only country. The closure of Shousha Camp in Tunisia in June contributed to the return of tens of thousands of migrants seeking to embark for Europe. By the end of the year, the number of migrants who had reached Italian shores was 42,925.<sup>148</sup>

In 2014, the fall of the government of Ali Zeidan; the launch of Operation Dignity in Benghazi, Libya's second largest city; and the armed confrontations in Tripoli between the militias of Misrata and Zintan forced large numbers of the Syrian community in Libya to flee. According to the Association of the Syrian Community in Libya,<sup>149</sup> about 100,000 Syrians were living in the country by mid-2014. The majority of them had arrived by sea, along with tens of thousands of migrants from sub-Saharan countries and the Horn of Africa, who

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<sup>148</sup> UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 'Asylum and Migration, Key Facts & Figures', accessed at <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4a1d406060.html> on 13 July 2015.

<sup>149</sup> The Association of the Syrian Community in Libya is the representative body for Syrians living in Libya and acts as the interlocutor with the Libyan authorities over the rights of Syrian citizens to education and healthcare assistance in the North African country.



had entered the country through the porous borders in the south. The chaos facilitated the entrance of new players to the human trafficking business, which led to a reduction in the price of the perilous journey for migrants.

At sea, the Italian Navy's Operation Mare Nostrum, which began in October 2013, had the side-effect of creating a low-cost formula for human trafficking in certain areas, especially Tajura, east of Tripoli. The smugglers started to use poor-quality boats with failing engines, relying on the Italian Navy's rescue operations. Moreover the smugglers also began to retrieve the boats abandoned by the Italian Navy after the rescue operations and re-use them for as many as six further trips. Due to these factors, in 2014 there were 170,100 new arrivals.<sup>150</sup>

According to a smuggler interviewed for this paper<sup>151</sup> in Zuwara, one of the main hubs for human trafficking in the country, the frequent use of the same worn-out boats is the main cause of the huge number of shipwrecks since mid-2014.

In 2015 the trend seems to have stabilised, although the percentage of migrant deaths at sea in the Mediterranean has increased by more than 30%, to a record 1,850 in the first five months of 2015.<sup>152</sup>

## The human trafficking business in Libya

The migrants' perilous journey via Libya starts in the Sahara Desert. Here, thousands of migrants perish even before reaching the coast to embark for Europe. Typically the migrants' first port of call once they cross into Libya is either the south-eastern oasis of Kufra or Sabha, in the west, before they head to Tripoli in search of a boat leaving for Europe. The journey is long: the lucky ones make it in three weeks; for others it can take months.

According to dozens of testimonies collected in Libya, Eritrean, Ethiopian and Sudanese brokers team up with Libyan smugglers to channel migrants via Libya to Europe. The first leg, from Mogadishu to Tripoli, costs \$600.

In the desert, armed groups operate along the migratory route, especially in the city of Sabha, kidnapping migrants and demanding ransoms, and often hand the victims over to other smugglers against their will. The latest ruse is to claim that the migrant has not

<sup>150</sup> UNHCR Bureau for Europe, 'Central Mediterranean Sea Initiative', March 2015, accessed at <http://www.unhcr.org/531990199.pdf> on 13 July 2015.

<sup>151</sup> Smuggler of migrants from Zuwara interviewed on May 2015.

<sup>152</sup> International Organization for Migration, *Migration Trends Across the Mediterranean: Connecting the Dots*, Geneva, June 2015, accessed at [http://www.altaiconsulting.com/docs/migration/Altai\\_Migration\\_trends\\_across\\_the\\_Mediterranean.pdf](http://www.altaiconsulting.com/docs/migration/Altai_Migration_trends_across_the_Mediterranean.pdf) on July 2015.



paid the agreed amount, thus forcing migrants to pay more to continue their trip. Here the business of human trafficking mixes with that of human trafficking.

Far from being safe places, the detention centres in Libya represent yet another obstacle on the risky journey for migrants. The jailers often ask for up to \$2,000 in exchange for a migrant's release. Once migrants are free, they head to Tripoli. There they phone home to give their family the green light to pay for the first leg of the trip to the capital, usually via Money Gram<sup>153</sup> or Western Union. Then they contact new brokers, who distribute them among the Libyan smugglers on the coast in accordance with the migrants' budget.

In the west of the country, between Sabratha and Zuwara, a ticket for the sea crossing costs up to \$2,000, which includes a crew of expert sailors from Tunisia or Egypt and a second try if the Libyan coastguard stops the boat. From Tajura, on the eastern outskirts of Tripoli, to Grabulli, 30 kilometres further east, the journey of hope costs only \$300. A rubber boat loaded with up to 200 people, a smuggler among the migrants, will depart even on rough seas. Often migrants oppose embarking when the weather is poor, but the low-cost smugglers force them to climb aboard.<sup>154</sup>

## Fundamentalist threats as a result of the migrant flow

In order to get a clear picture of the terrorist threat that may come through the channels of human trafficking via Libya, it is necessary to analyse the phenomenon on three distinct levels. First the nationality of the migrants and their potential connections with extremism, second the risks that migrants face along the way in the areas contaminated by terrorism, and third the infiltration of terrorist groups in the human trafficking business in Libya.

### The nationalities of the migrants

According to the UNHCR, 60% of the people who undertook the dangerous sea journey in the first five months of 2015 came from Syria, Somalia and Afghanistan, countries torn apart by war and generalised violence; or from Eritrea, which is ruled by one of the most repressive governments in Africa.<sup>155</sup> Many of those coming from other major sending countries—Nigeria, Gambia, Senegal, Niger, Mali, Bangladesh, Sudan and Mauritania—are seeking to improve their economic opportunities. Some of them arrive in Libya to work there, with no intention of attempting the sea trip, and are then forced to flee Libya due to

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<sup>153</sup> According to migrants interviewed by the authors in an identification centre in Misrata, controlled by the Department to Counter Illegal Migration, May 2015.

<sup>154</sup> Interviews with migrants in the Department to Counter Illegal Migration's centres in Misrata, Zawayah and Surman; with human smugglers from Western Libya; and with the Libyan coastguard in Misrata between October 2014 and May 2015.

<sup>155</sup> Human Rights Watch, *The Mediterranean Migration Crisis. Why People Flee, What the EU Should Do* (June 2015), accessed at [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/eu0615\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/eu0615_web.pdf) on 13 July 2015.



the abuse and violence of the militias, which has increased since the current hostilities broke out in May 2014.

Considering the fundamentalist ideology that is being spread in Syria, Somalia, Sudan and Mali, migrants coming from these countries might be involved with fundamentalist groups such as IS in Syria, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Mauritania, al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria or other fundamentalist groups in north Sudan. However there is no evidence of connections between the migrants reaching Europe across the Mediterranean Sea and the Islamic fundamentalist networks either in the region or in Europe.

However, the risk of fundamentalist infiltration among migrants has led the House of Representatives in Tobruk to ban Palestinians, Syrians and Sudanese from entering Libya because migrants from these countries are undermining Libya's security. The Haftar-leaning House of Representatives has accused Sudanese, Palestinians and Syrians of having joined Ansar al-Sharia and the other Islamist groups which are fighting the pro-government forces in the eastern city of Benghazi.<sup>156</sup>

So far the only episode that supports this possibility occurred in mid-April 2015, when migrants from Nigeria and Ghana accused other migrants of having thrown a fellow passenger overboard because of an argument over religion. However the Italian authorities could not find any evidence supporting the allegation, and the murder may only have taken place because of the lack of space on board.<sup>157</sup>

### Migrants facing fundamentalist threats

With the expansion of fundamentalism in Libya, migrants are now also subject to religiously motivated attacks. Despite the presence of fundamentalist cells throughout Libya, it is only in certain areas, where they have reached significant military strength, that they have officially declared their presence. On 12 January 2015, the Libyan branch of IS claimed responsibility for the abduction of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians in the city of Sirte—although a tribal source said 13 of them had been detained by smugglers and later released, this information was never confirmed.<sup>158</sup> On 13 February IS announced the creation of the Province of Tripoli and Sirte and within two days released a video showing the beheading of 21 Egyptian Christians, alleged to be those kidnapped about a month before.

<sup>156</sup> Reuters, 'Libya's Official Government Bans Palestinians, Syrians, Sudanese', 6 January 2015, accessed at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/06/us-libya-security-idUSKBN0KF17720150106> on 13 July 2015.

<sup>157</sup> Repubblica Palermo, 'Sbarchi, rissa sul gommone per motivi religiosi, gettati in mare dodici cristiani. Naufragio con 40 vittime', 16 April 2015, accessed at [http://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/04/16/news/sbarchi\\_600\\_profughi\\_a\\_trapani\\_sentiti\\_i\\_testimoni\\_della\\_sparatoria\\_al\\_largo\\_della\\_libia-112087444/](http://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/04/16/news/sbarchi_600_profughi_a_trapani_sentiti_i_testimoni_della_sparatoria_al_largo_della_libia-112087444/) on 13 July 2015.

<sup>158</sup> According to a source close to the Tobruk-based Libyan Parliament, interviewed in January 2015.



On 19 April, IS disseminated a new video on social media platforms that showed the executions of dozens of Ethiopian Christians, allegedly in southern and eastern Libya, which it claimed were carried out by the IS groups 'Fezzan Province' in the south and 'Barqa Province' in the east. The assailants in the video have been recognised as Ethiopians expelled from Europe and returned to their homeland, from where they once again started out for Europe.

According to migrants, on 7 June, IS militants captured 88 Eritrean Christians close to the oasis of Zella, near Jufra, in south-eastern Libya.<sup>159</sup> The mass kidnapping occurred when a convoy was ambushed by militants and a group of migrants was forced into a truck, while another 12 Eritrean Christian women were loaded into a smaller pick-up.<sup>160</sup> According to Meron Estafanos, co-founder of the Stockholm-based International Commission on Eritrean Refugees, the militants asked all of the Muslims to identify themselves. They were also asked questions about the Koran and their religious observance in an attempt to catch out Christians pretending to be Muslims.<sup>161</sup>



Overcrowded boat setting off from the Libyan coast heading for the EU - 2014

### Migrant routes at risk of fundamentalist infiltration

Due to the lack of authority following the failure of the post-Gaddafi state, Libya's 4,383 kilometre land border and 1,770 kilometre coastline on the Mediterranean remain completely out of control, harbouring both migrant-smuggling networks and fundamentalist groups that are rapidly flourishing. The connections between the two networks are yet to be proven, although foreign governments, including those of France, Italy and Egypt, have warned

<sup>159</sup> According to a spokesperson for the Italian Committee for Refugees in Libya, interviewed in June 2015.

<sup>160</sup> Libya Herald, 'IS Grabs 88 Eritrean Christians', 9 June 2015, accessed at <https://www.libyaherald.com/2015/06/06/is-grabs-88-eritrean-christians/> on 30 July 2015.

<sup>161</sup> Christianpost.com, 'Christians Among 88 Eritrean Refugees Kidnapped by ISIS', 8 June 2015, accessed at <http://www.christianpost.com/news/christians-among-86-eritrean-refugees-kidnapped-by-isis-less-than-two-months-after-mass-execution-of-ethiopian-christians-140106/-4LeR7JxRA0PblC4e.99> on 13 July 2015.



the EU of the likelihood that human trafficking networks have been infiltrated by the rapidly growing fundamentalist groups in the region.

The French run military operations out of Madama, a counterterrorism base in Niger, where the US also has a military presence, 100 kilometres south of the Libyan border. Likewise, Algeria has ratcheted up its border security, worried about violent spillover effects. Finally, the situation has led the European Council to approve the EUNAVFOR MED action plan to dismantle the smuggling network across the central Mediterranean Sea.

Refugees from West, Central and Southern Africa most probably follow old trade routes through the Sahel, such as the route from Mali to Libya via southern Algeria, or the route through Niger to Agadez (a major trafficking hub) and up through southern Libya to the coast. However, for the growing number of sub-Saharan migrants, there are several alternative routes. Refugees from Eritrea, Somalia and the Horn of Africa are most likely to come overland through Sudan or via the Red Sea and the Sinai Peninsula before crossing into Libya. Another possibility is through Algeria and then Tunisia. Syrian refugees, also coming via Egypt or Sudan, enter Libya from the southern desert.

The main routes channelling migrants to the embarkation points in the north pass through two large southern Libyan cities, Sabha and Kufra. From Sabha, migrants head to Tripoli across the Nafusa mountain range, while those passing by the Jebel Sherif, 130 kilometres south-west of Kufra, are sent to the city of Ajdabiya, the first collecting point for the human smugglers' network in the east. For those arriving in Ajdabiya, the trip counts as an additional leg as they still have to reach Tripoli, a mandatory stop on the route to Europe. In fact the embarkation spots are concentrated—due to terrestrial and marine morphology—across just 200 kilometres of coastline, from the town of Al Khoms, 120 kilometres east of Tripoli, to the town of Abu Qammash, 25 kilometres east of the Tunisian border. In Libya the main embarkation points for migrants heading to Europe are Al Khoms, Gasr Garabulli (Castelverde), Zliten, Tajura, West Tripoli, Sabratha, Zuwara and Abu Qammash.

Of the migratory routes across Libya the Sahel is the one at most risk of infiltration by terrorists because of the massive presence of Islamic fundamentalist groups out there. Although dominated by indigenous Tebu and Arab tribes, there is a significant presence of al-Qaeda-linked jihadists in south-western Libya today. Jihadists who had previously operated in northern Mali, including Moktar Belmokhtar, the Algerian leader of the Saharan al-Qaeda affiliate al-Mourabitoun, are now believed to be in the 'Salvador Pass', the triangular border region between Libya, Algeria and Niger. All groups are profiting to differing extents from illicit trafficking and trade, as there are few viable economic generators in the Sahel region. Al-Mourabitoun is the most notorious—Belmokhtar has a longstanding history as an arms and cigarette trafficker—with well-established networks across the Sahel and the Maghreb. The group has also recently been tied to cartels trafficking cocaine, linked to the



Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO).<sup>162</sup> MUJAO members in Mali have long been purported to have links with cocaine trafficking. AQIM is known to use kidnapping for ransom as a means of financing its terrorist activities, although this has subsided as of late, apparently due to a lack of available targets.

Following IS's February 2015 conquest of the town of Sirte in the northern central part of Libya, the smuggling routes channelling migrants from the south to the shores of the central Mediterranean have been highly exposed to the risk of fundamentalist infiltration. This is especially true as the majority of migrants gather in Ajdabiya, 400 kilometres east of Sirte, where IS has full control. Migrants are first held in Ajdabiya, a stronghold of the Salafi movement Ansar al-Sharia, and then smuggled from Sirte via Waddan, Hun, Soq and then Bani Walid to Tripoli.

Fundamentalist groups have also been spotted along the western human trafficking route. In an interview with the authors, the commander of a revolutionary brigade in Jabal Nafusa, who refused to disclose his identity for security reasons, warned of training camps for jihadis on Nafusa Mountain.<sup>163</sup> Meanwhile, Tunisian fundamentalist groups are expanding in the town of Sabratha, 77 kilometres west of Tripoli.

Indeed, according to local intelligence groups, the stronghold of Salafi militias linked to IS in western Libya is Sabratha. Today, Sabratha is one of the main hubs for smuggling migrants to Europe across the Mediterranean.

### **Fundamentalist militias expanding into the business of human trafficking**

A report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime published in May 2015 stated that the value of migrant smuggling in Libya had risen from \$8–\$20 million in 2010 to \$255–\$323 million in 2014. Tom Keatinge, Director of the Centre for Financial Crime and Security Studies at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) noted, 'They are making money from human trafficking through Libya, [that is] the way they are funding their proliferation. They are not moving people themselves, but they are taxing the people who are.'<sup>164</sup>

So far only two sources in Libya have spoken about the involvement of Islamic fundamentalist groups in migrant smuggling. A journalist from Misrata interviewed for this research

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<sup>162</sup> MUJAO is a splinter group of AQIM that formally announced its existence following its abduction of three humanitarian workers from a Saharan refugee camp in Tindouf, Algeria, on 23 October 2011. MUJAO's leaders are known to be drug traffickers involved in the drugs trade in the Sahel and southern Algeria.

<sup>163</sup> Commander of one of revolutionary brigades on Nafusa Mountain, Libya, interviewed in October 2014.

<sup>164</sup> T. Keatinge, Libya: A Growing Hub for Criminal Economies and Terrorist Financing in the Trans-Sahara, The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime Policy Brief (11 May 2015), accessed at <http://www.globalinitiative.net/download/global-initiative/Libya%20Criminal%20Economies%20in%20the%20trans-Sahara%20-%20May%202015.pdf> on May 2015.



study—who declined to disclose his identity for security reasons—said that, in April 2015, fundamentalists moored in Sirte to try to enter the human trafficking market with the aim of controlling the migratory route from Chad and Niger to south Libya, as well as the maritime pathway from Sirte to Zliten, 200 kilometres east of Tripoli. According to him, human trafficking is a new source of funding for the fundamentalist groups, although so far it has not become a channel for transporting terrorists to Europe.<sup>165</sup> According to security sources in Misrata, so far it is only Tunisian fundamentalist groups that are already operative in the market.<sup>166</sup>

The massive number of foreign fighters exported from Tunisia represents the main sending channel for Islamic fundamentalists in Libya. Sabratha might now function as the meeting point for Islamic extremism and the smuggling of migrants in Libya. Like Sirte, following the recent massive flow of foreign fighters into the town, Sabratha is experiencing a transition from the rule of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups to the rule of IS. In the nearby town of Zawiyah, 50 kilometres west of Sabratha, alleged IS members broke into the local migrant detention centre and captured 300 migrants.<sup>167</sup>

### Migration as a policy for infiltrating jihadists into Europe

Due to the increase in demand, the human trafficking business is attracting new players to the market, including the jihadist organisations rapidly expanding across the region and continuously seeking resources. However the participation of Islamic extremist groups does not directly imply that terrorists are being smuggled into Europe. Terrorist organisations might adopt more affordable options, such as the radicalisation of individuals living in Europe or the provision of false documents to well-trained terrorists who are then smuggled in by air. However the possibility of migrants reaching Italian shores—given the several flaws in the European security system—might make this method attractive.

For the first time IS has demonstrated great interest in the relationship between terrorism and immigration as an instrument of propaganda. An IS document written by Arhim al-Libim, titled *Libya: The Strategic Gateway for the Islamic State*,<sup>168</sup> published on 23 January 2015, underlines this link. Repeating the same points made by IS in the *Black Flags* series (published in November 2014), this document focuses on three main issues: 1) it identifies

<sup>165</sup> Journalist from Misrata, interviewed in Misrata in March 2015.

<sup>166</sup> Member of the Misratan security forces, interviewed in Misrata in March 2015.

<sup>167</sup> Sky News, 'From Revolution to Ruin: Libya's Battle With IS', 18 June 2015, accessed at <http://news.sky.com/story/1503916/from-revolution-to-ruin-libyas-battle-with-is> on 13 July 2015.

<sup>168</sup> Translation produced by the Quilliam Foundation: C. Winter (translator), 'Libya: The Strategic Gateway for the Islamic State', Translation and Analysis of IS Recruitment Propaganda for Libya, Quilliam Foundation (London, February 2015), accessed at <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/libya-the-strategic-gateway-for-the-is.pdf> on 15 July 2015.



Libya as a hub from which to launch an attack on the south of Europe; 2) it emphasises the tactical value that the exploitation of illegal immigration may have for penetrating Europe; and 3) it underlines that there are now arsenals available in Libya that could permit a rapid expansion of IS in the Maghreb. The paper states:

As well as the harmonious social makeup of Libya, and the fact that 99 percent of [its population] is made up of Maliki Sunnis—aside from the Ibadhia minority—by the grace of God to Libya, God bestowed upon this country a strategic position and immense potential. . . . These are things from which it would be possible to derive great benefits if they were efficiently exploited. Unfortunately, some supporters do not recognise the extent of the Libyan arena, the proliferation of variant weaponry within it, its geographic dimensions and its critical environs. Sufficed to say, Libya looks upon the sea, the desert, mountains, and six states: Egypt, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Algeria and Tunisia. Add to that the fact that it has a long coastline and looks upon the southern Crusader states, which can be reached with ease by even a rudimentary boat and note that the number of 'illegal immigration' trips from this coast is massive, estimated to be as high as 500 people a day, as a low estimate. According to many [of these immigrants], it is easily possible to pass through maritime security checkpoints and arrive in cities. If this was even partially exploited and developed strategically, pandemonium could be wrought in southern Europe. It is even possible that there could be a closure of shipping lines because of the targeting of Crusader ships and tankers.<sup>169</sup>

While debate about how to accommodate migrants raged in Europe, a steady stream of migrants had continued to arrive on the shores of the south and Italy in particular. On 17 December 2014, the Palermo state prosecutor opened an investigation into the potential infiltration of IS elements among immigrants. Some migrants indicated the presence of extremists who claimed to be heading to Italy to be reunited with groups already present in Italy, including some in Rome who were targeting the Vatican. In particular, two individuals, a Palestinian and a Syrian, expressly stated to their fellow passengers that they were part of a cell. These individuals seem to have been identified and sent to a reception centre, from where they have now absconded.<sup>170</sup>

Moreover, rumours indicate the presence of extremists among illegal immigrants coming from Syria via the Turkish coast. In July 2014, military intelligence warned of a cell of five

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> G. Giacalone, 'Califfato e AQIM: service provider del Nord Africa', Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies (2 February 2015), accessed at <http://www.itstime.it/w/califfato-e-aqim-service-provider-del-nord-africa-by-giovanni-giacalone/> on 15 July 2015.



Tunisian jihadists, with Canadian passports, which had been formed and trained in the Syrian camps near Saluq and aimed to arrive in Italy on a ship with 400 illegal immigrants.

The case of Abdelmajid Touil is particularly interesting. On 20 May 2015 the Italian police arrested a Moroccan man near Milan, who was allegedly involved in the 18 March attack on Tunisia's Bardo Museum. According to anti-terrorism investigator Bruno Megale, the only trace that the Italian authorities had of Touil prior to his arrest was that he had arrived in Italy on 17 February along with migrants from a smuggler's boat, where he was identified by the authorities in Porto Empedocle, Sicily. He was subsequently issued with an expulsion decree. It is not clear whether or when he left Italy or how he returned. The Italian police now believe he may have returned to Tunisia for a time and helped organise the 18 March attack in Tunis.<sup>171</sup> Currently the man is still being held by the Italian authorities, although his involvement has not yet become completely clear. The allegations made in the Tunisian arrest warrant against Touil include premeditated murder, conspiracy to commit attacks against the state, belonging to a terrorist group, and recruiting and training others to commit terrorist attacks. The Tunisian authorities do not think Touil is the mastermind behind the Bardo attack. However, the spokesman for Tunisia's Interior Ministry, Mohammed Ali Aroui, has confirmed that Touil is the subject of an international arrest warrant for his involvement in the attack. If the allegation turns out to be true, this would be the first case of a terrorist coming to Europe through illegal immigration channels.

According to the Italian terrorism expert Marco Lombardi,<sup>172</sup> even if not certain, the use of migration flows to import terrorists remains possible for the following reasons:

- A surplus of fighters: IS has attracted large numbers of foreign fighters, many of whom remain in the area of operations for a limited period. These are men who have acquired operational expertise and are accustomed to using it. The number of veterans of the jihad is thus increasing.
- The modus operandi of terrorism has changed from organised attacks with structured cells in specific roles, to random ones implemented by lone wolves. When they return home, former fighters can become (to use the cyberwarfare term) 'zombies' that can be activated to attack soft targets.

<sup>171</sup> Associated Press, 'Tunisia Museum Attack Suspect Arrested in Italy for Helping Orchestrate Terror Massacre', 20 May 2015, accessed at <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/tunisia-museum-terror-attack-suspect-arrested-italy-article-1.2229062> on 30 July 2015.

<sup>172</sup> M. Lombardi, 'Migranti, clandestini, terroristi: indagini a Palermo', Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies (18 December 2014), accessed at <http://www.itstime.it/w/migranti-clandestini-terroristi-indagini-a-palermo-marco-lombardi/> on 15 July 2015.



- The policies of some North African states are based on the principle of non-readmission of citizens returning from the battlefield of the Middle East. For example, Morocco has adopted this policy for fear that jihadists might commit attacks in the country, as happened in Casablanca in 2003 when attacks were carried out by fighters returning from Afghanistan. Thus a potentially large number of jihadists are forced to remain abroad.

The combination of these factors, today, shows how the channels of illegal immigration could be used to transport terrorists.


## Conclusion

Since the escalation of violence in Libya in November 2013, the flow of migrants through the North African country has increased rapidly and, due to the large amounts of money involved, has attracted new players to the market. The smugglers themselves remain the same due to their highly technical skills, such as the ability to find their way through the desert and the maritime skills that illicit trafficking requires along the coastline. However, special attention should be paid to the new brokers who have inundated the human trafficking market. They do not need technical know-how; they simply need to have the funds available to pay the smugglers in advance on behalf of the migrants. Their business is not limited to paying for the different legs of the journey but also includes making ransom demands at several stops along the way.

Fundamentalist groups might have approached the human trafficking market by capitalising on rows between brokers. If confirmed, this should be analysed in the context of the expansion of Islamic fundamentalist ideology across the entire MENA region, in combination with the economic crisis in Libya that has resulted from the current crisis in the oil industry.

The failure of the state and the weapons awash in Libya offer a breeding ground for fundamentalist movements such as IS; Libya hosts the first 'Province' of al-Baghdadi's Caliphate outside of its Syrian and Iraqi homelands. Expanding from illegal businesses such as the trafficking of drugs and weapons, these groups may have been attracted to the large amount of money pouring into the Libyan market from human trafficking and thus infiltrated the market. The oil industry crisis and the increasingly high unemployment rate have led new moderate Muslim smugglers to turn a blind eye to the fundamentalists' involvement in the market, prompting solid cooperation between them and the brokers linked to fundamentalist networks.





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ISBN: 978-90-823826-2-4



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