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Islamic State in Libya – IS's Third Biggest Province in 2015

Beyond Material Support: Promoting ISIL Accountability for Atrocity Crimes

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MAY 2025



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Introduction

Libya rarely appears in newspaper headlines in 2024, but this is not indicative of a country moving towards stability. Instead, Libya continues to be riddled with violence,¹ defined by parallel and competing systems of governance and beholden to foreign meddling.² Armed groups rule parts of Libya single-handedly or in conglomerates³ – de facto subsuming any mechanisms of accountability or welfare to their whims.⁴ These realities are particularly precarious for women and minorities – creating an environment where abductions and killings can happen without consequence, such as in 2019 when female MP Seham Sergiwa was harassed online and then abducted (her body has never been found and she is officially still missing).⁵ For this kidnapping to occur with such brazenness and impunity, several dynamics needed to be prevalent: First, the understanding of armed actors that they would not be held accountable for criminal undertakings, such as kidnappings;⁶ second, a complicit apprehension amongst parts of society that women should not be outspoken or engage controversially in public life;⁷ and third, divisiveness amongst Libya's political elite which foiled any punitive legal action in the name of the public good and safety for all Libyan citizens.⁸ To the dismay of many Libyans, Libyan women particularly and Seham Sergiwa most specifically, these three dynamics had been established since the removal of Qaddafi in 2011. Therefore, this abduction is representative of broader ills defining Libya – and which also played into the hands of Salafi-jihadis like the Islamic State: impunity, discrimination and division.

However, within the plethora of armed groups in Libya in 2024, Salafi-jihadi groups affiliated with the Islamic State, are few.⁹ This stands in stark contrast to the years of 2014-2017 when Islamic State in Libya (IS-Libya) governed territory in the country¹⁰ and was part of a rambunctious network orchestrating attacks in Europe and managing large foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) movements.¹¹ The reasons for this dwindling of IS-Libya are three-fold: First,

- 1 Virginie Collombier and Wolfram Lacher, *Violence and Social Transformation in Libya* (Oxford University Press, 2023).
- 2 Addison Emig, "Libya's Elusive Elections: Will 2023 Be the Year for Elections? | Wilson Center," Wilson Center (blog), August 16, 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/libyas-elusive-elections-will-2023-be-year-elections>.
- 3 Emad Badi, "Exploring Armed Groups in Libya: Perspectives on SSR in a Hybrid Environment" (DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, 2020), <https://www.dcaf.ch/exploring-armed-groups-libya-perspectives-ssr-hybrid-environment>.
- 4 Wolfram Lacher and Alaa al-Idrissi, "CAPITAL OF MILITIAS: Tripoli's Armed Groups Capture the Libyan State" (Small Arms Survey, 2018), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep20046>; Inga Kristina Trauthig and Guy Robert Eyre, "'Quietist' Salafis after the 'Arab Revolts' in Algeria and Libya (2011-2019): Between Insecurity and Political Subordination," *Mediterranean Politics* 0, no. 0 (2023): 1-24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2023.2272474>.
- 5 Inga Kristina Trauthig, "'This Is the Fate of Libyan Women: Contempt, Ridicule, and Indifference of Seham Sergiwa,'" *Conflict, Security & Development* 24, no. 2 (March 3, 2024): 149-73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2024.2334832>.
- 6 Amnesty International, "Libya: Silenced Voices: Libyan Women Human Rights Defenders Under Attack," Amnesty International, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde19/8657/2018/en/>.
- 7 Lindsay J. Benstead, "Why Do Some Arab Citizens See Democracy as Unsuitable for Their Country?," *Democratization* 22, no. 7 (November 10, 2015): 1183-1208, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2014.940041>.
- 8 Yury Barmin, "Revolution in Libya," in *Handbook of Revolutions in the 21st Century: The New Waves of Revolutions, and the Causes and Effects of Disruptive Political Change*, ed. Jack A. Goldstone, Leonid Grinin, and Andrey Korotayev, *Societies and Political Orders in Transition* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 725-38, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86468-2_28; Mark Furness and Bernhard Trautner, "Reconstituting Social Contracts in Conflict-Affected MENA Countries: Whither Iraq and Libya?," *World Development* 135 (November 1, 2020): 105085, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105085>.
- 9 "BTI 2024 Libya Country Report," BTI 2024, accessed June 9, 2024, <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report?isocode=LB&cHash=03c7df7c310e6afd95d0de7fb781bdd2>.
- 10 Aaron Zelin, "The Islamic State's Burgeoning Capital in Sirte, Libya" (Washington Institute, 2015), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-states-burgeoning-capital-sirte-libya>.
- 11 Efraim Benmelech and Esteban F. Klor, "What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 7 (October 2, 2020): 1458-81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1482214>; Lorne L. Dawson, "The Demise of the Islamic

local Libyan military crackdowns that—with international support—drove IS-Libya out of its stronghold Sirte in 2016 and hence eliminated its governance;¹² second, high competitiveness for recruits in the Libyan market of armed groups;¹³ and third, the decline of IS generally.¹⁴ In 2024, IS has decentralized into a network with influence in Asia (like ISKP) and sub-Saharan Africa (like IS-Sahel).¹⁵

This report on IS-Libya aims to contribute to the debate of an emerging global terrorist threat landscape based on a decentralized IS franchise.¹⁶ In short, IS-Libya currently is of little significance to the global terrorist threat landscape, but four structural dynamics underline the necessity to keep monitoring Libya. First, the proximity of IS affiliates in the Sahel region that have been growing in potency over the last years;¹⁷ second, Libya's permanently favorable geographic location consisting of large swaths of uninhabited territory with porous borders towards the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa while simultaneously at the gates to Europe; third, an abundance of weaponry and local armed groups which could be incentivized to switch allegiance if the right *douceurs* were offered – there is some precedence for this;¹⁸ and fourth and final, existing grievances amplified by continuous mismanagement of the country which are particularly acute in neglected regions like Fezzan – and remind of similar dynamics that led to IS-Libya's takeover in Sirte.¹⁹

This report will provide insights into the structure and organization of the Islamic State in Libya by focusing on its heyday. It will outline how IS-Libya could grow into the Islamic State's third biggest province outside its core territory of Iraq and Syria in the mid-2010s²⁰ – and hence identify vulnerabilities for IS to capitalize on (again) in the future.

State and the Fate of Its Western Foreign Fighters: Six Things to Consider" (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2018), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19613>.

- 12 Patrick Wintour, "Isis Loses Control of Libyan City of Sirte," *The Guardian*, December 5, 2016, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/05/isis-loses-control-of-libyan-city-of-sirte>.
- 13 Lydia Sizer, "Libya's Terrorism Challenge: Assessing the Salafi-Jihadi Threat" (Middle East Institute, 2017), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/libyas-terrorism-challenge-assessing-salafi-jihadi-threat>.
- 14 Léa Eveline Jeanne Stéphanie Massé, "Losing Mood(s): Examining Jihadi Supporters' Responses to ISIS' Territorial Decline," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 4 (May 19, 2022): 725–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1733989>.
- 15 Haroro Ingram and Andrew Mines, "From Expeditionary to Inspired: Situating External Operations within the Islamic State's Insurgency Method," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – ICCT (blog)*, November 23, 2023, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/expeditionary-inspired-situating-external-operations-within-islamic-states-insurgency>; International Crisis Group (ICG), "Containing a Resilient ISIS in Central and North-Eastern Syria | Crisis Group" (Brussels, July 18, 2022), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria/containing-resilient-isis-central-and-north>.
- 16 Javed Ali, "The Islamic State's Afghanistan-Based Affiliate Is Emerging as a Global Menace," *Defense One (blog)*, March 26, 2024, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2024/03/islamic-states-afghanistan-based-affiliate-emerging-global-menace/395223/>.
- 17 Jacob Zenn, "ISIS in Africa: The Caliphate's Next Frontier," *New Lines Institute (blog)*, May 26, 2020, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/nonstate-actors/terrorism-and-counterterrorism/isis-in-africa-the-caliphates-next-frontier/>.
- 18 Wolfram Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020).
- 19 Kristina Hummel, "Europe's True Southern Frontier: The General, the Jihadis, and the High-Stakes Contest for Libya's Fezzan Region" (CTC Westpoint, November 27, 2017), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/europes-true-southern-frontier-the-general-the-jihadis-and-the-high-stakes-contest-for-libyas-fezzan-region/>; Nate Wilson and Elie Abouaoun, "On the Road to Peace, Libya Makes Progress but Hits Pitfalls," *United States Institute of Peace (USIP) (blog)*, July 14, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/07/road-peace-libya-makes-progress-hits-pitfalls>.
- 20 Zelin, "The Islamic State's Burgeoning Capital in Sirte, Libya"; Frederic Wehrey, "When the Islamic State Came to Libya" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 8, 2018), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/10/when-islamic-state-came-to-libya-pub-75541>.

The report has three guiding questions:

1. How did the Islamic State in Libya develop organizationally from Derna to Sirte to dispersed networks in Southern Libya?
2. To what extent was the Islamic State in Sirte a local, regional or international endeavor?
3. To what extent was the Islamic State in Libya innovative?

In order to answer these questions, the report will rely on three data sources. Primary data,²¹ relevant secondary literature, as well as interviews with previous or current residents of Benghazi, Derna, Sirte, Sebha and Tripoli. The interviews were conducted in person (Tunisia, Morocco, UK and US) and online between 2020-2022. The latter are crucial to probe divergences from IS-Libya's claimed behavior and official propaganda versus actual behavior. Based on this, the author has deduced the most relevant insights to answer the guiding questions and exfiltrated traits pertaining to the Libyan case of IS and relevant to justice and accountability for IS-Libya's behavior and actions. While the data analyzed for this report covers various sources and is sufficient for a triangulation aiming to uncover dominant themes, the report is written as a starting point for a thorough examination of IS-Libya's crimes and actions rather than a comprehensive overview of IS-Libya's heyday.

The report begins by discussing the backdrop of Islamist and Salafi groups in post-Qaddafi Libya to show the environment IS-Libya inserted itself. It proceeds to give an overview of IS-Libya including major attacks inside and outside Libya, and a glimpse into its diminished activity since it was chased out of Sirte in late 2016/early 2017. The report then moves to documenting and analyzing IS-Libya's heyday in Libya which ranged from 2014 – early 2017. Those sections focus on examinations of structure, policy, and practice – including potential innovations of IS-Libya.

The report concludes by discussing current implications of IS-Libya's rise and demise. It summarizes why IS-Libya was so affected by the decline of IS core. Crucially IS-Libya was the closest resemblance to ISIL's core provinces and received significant support from IS core (including fighters and money). The conclusion also picks up again the topic of sub-Saharan fighters in Libya. With that, it pivots towards current strengths of IS globally – namely its African offshoots.

Background to IS-Libya

During the 2011 revolution, Salafi-jihadi groups were neither the main drivers nor the initiators of the uprising against Qaddafi, which induced hundreds of thousands of people to take to the streets across the country, demanding justice and an end to corruption.²² However, among the forces fighting were also hardline Islamist militias, which prospered the longer the fighting continued and were aided by its particularly violent nature, which in turn had been fueled by the hard-handed, brutal response of the regime.²³ In addition, the revolutionaries freed many jailed regime opponents, among them Islamist militants – while simultaneously

21 Including collections by Aymenn al-Tamimi, Aaron Zelin, George Washington University as well as primary data shared with the author from Libyan sources in 2020.

22 Kamal Eldin Osman Salih, "The Roots and Causes of the 2011 Arab Uprisings," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2013): 184-206, <https://doi.org/10.13169/arabstudquar.35.2.0184>.

23 Alex Crawford, *Colonel Gaddafi's Hat* (London: Collins, 2012).

Salafi-jihadi groups such as al-Qa'ida actively started deploying senior members to Libya and Libyans who had traveled to fight with al-Qa'ida in Iraq after the 2003 US invasion, for instance, returned to the country.²⁴

The collapse of governance and security that followed the 2011 overthrow of the Qaddafi regime then created beneficial conditions for Islamist and Salafi groups to re-emerge in Libya relatively unperturbed. Relatedly, Libya has exhibited a significant availability of weaponry since 2011; in recent years the situation has been exacerbated due to blatant but well-documented breaches of the UN arms embargo.²⁵ The porous borders that have resulted from the non-existent nation state authority – which would in any case normally have faced challenges in controlling the borders of an extraordinarily large territory – allow for local actors to negotiate the terms of border management – which leads to a final structural point that facilitated the Islamic State's emergence in Libya: the location of Libya as a bridge between sub-Saharan Africa and Europe.²⁶

The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), and later al-Qa'ida, was the womb of Libyan Salafi-jihadism and played a significant role in developing the Libyan Salafi-jihadi networks before, during and after 2011. Before 2011, the mobilization of Muslims worldwide to fight in Afghanistan and ultimately become part of a global jihadi movement was most significant²⁷ – also for Libyan Salafis. However, there were different paths to take from those early days of the Salafi-jihadi movement – and two Libyan brothers encapsulate those different choices. Abdelwahhab Mohamed Gaid and Mohamed Hassan Gaid both grew up in Libya's southern desert town of Sebha and became involved in Islamic activism linked to the LIFG in the 1980s – with the goal to oust Qaddafi. Fast forward to today and Abdelwahhab Gaid is a Libyan politician who co-founded the al-Umma al-Wasat Party (The Central National Party), a small Islamist splinter party. When I spoke to Abdelwahhab Gaid in 2021 he referred to his brother as a “lost brother.” He clarified that he meant he had lost him to violent Salafi jihadism – not losing his brother physically when he died.

While Abdelwahhab turned to parliamentary politics, his actions once in parliament have been controversial²⁸ and he has been regularly accused of being involved with more radical groups outside parliament, most prominently al-Qa'ida.²⁹ His brother Mohamed Hassan Gaid was killed by as an American drone strike in Pakistan in 2012. By that time, he had risen to a leading al-Qa'ida figure with the nom de guerre Abu Yahya al-Libi.³⁰

24 Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, “Islamic Militants among Prisoners Freed from Libyan Jail,” CNN, August 26, 2011, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/08/26/libya.militants.analysis/index.html>. Omar Ashour, “Why Does the Islamic State Endure and Expand?” (Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), 2015), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09845>.

25 The Panel of Experts on Libya, “Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Libya Submitted in Accordance with Resolution 2644 (2022)” (United Nations Security Council (UNSC), September 15, 2023), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/234/61/PDF/N2323461.pdf?OpenElement>.

26 Juliane von Mittelstaedt, “German UN Envoy Martin Kobler on Spread of IS in Libya,” Der Spiegel, February 4, 2016, sec. International, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/german-un-envoy-martin-kobler-on-spread-of-is-in-libya-a-1075475.html>.

27 Thomas Hegghammer, *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad* (Cambridge (GB): Cambridge University Pr., 2020).

28 For example, he was a vocal advocate of the Political Isolation Law which was highly controversial.

29 Ibrahim Fraihat, “An Ill-Advised Purge in Libya,” Brookings (blog), February 18, 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/an-ill-advised-purge-in-libya/>.

30 David D. Kirkpatrick, “Political Islam and the Fate of Two Libyan Brothers,” The New York Times, October 6, 2012, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/07/world/africa/political-islam-and-the-fate-of-two-libyan-brothers.html>.

For the 2011 revolution, these histories meant that al-Qa'ida was in a prime spot to coordinate individual straddlers of Libyan militants. In this vein, Abu Anas al-Libi is considered the “builder of al-Qa'ida's network in Libya” who served as an intermediary between al-Qa'ida senior leadership in Pakistan and the group's leaders on the ground in Libya.³¹ The exiled LIFG members came back to Libya from various places – some coming from Manchester, UK, to serve in these groups.³² One family tied up in these dynamics was Salman Abedi's, the individual responsible for the 2017 Manchester arena terrorist attack.³³

After the killing of Qaddafi, the al-Qa'ida linked networks pursued three main tactics: First, growing their presence in Libya and bolstering Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) as a flexible network of Salafi-jihadi groups affiliated to al-Qa'ida.³⁴ The Salafi-jihadi umbrella organizations like the Benghazi and Derna Mujahedin Shura Councils (BMSC and DMSC) were amongst those efforts. Second, starting local fronts under different names – most prominently Ansar al Sharia. Those groups were crucial for incorporating new members and recent recruits to jihadism – many of which started their radicalization online or when talking to prior jihadist generations in Libya as was possible at the eve of the Libyan revolution. Third – and hand in hand with the previous point – establishing themselves locally with extensive *da'wa* and potentially some governance work, like policing.³⁵

But al-Qa'ida did not have free reign in Libya from 2011. Instead, in the field of jihadist competition in Libya, al-Qa'ida was only one of the bidders – with its biggest rival being IS.³⁶ One of the main tactics to expand influence and keep IS at bay was the proliferation of Ansar al Sharia groups in Libya – similar groups had already successfully formed in Yemen or Tunisia (with close linkages al-Qa'ida).³⁷ In Libya, Ansar al Sharia became the most powerful jihadi group until IS-Libya managed to establish governance in Sirte in 2015.

Groups calling themselves Ansar al-Sharia first formed in Derna. In a Benghazi, Ansar al-Sharia rose to international prominence after it was accused of perpetrating the 2012 attack on the US consulate, killing America's Ambassador Christopher Stevens.³⁸ While these groups were initially independent from one another, they united under the name Ansar al-Sharia Libya in late 2012. Derna and Benghazi developed spatial pockets in which Salafi-jihadi groups largely did what they wanted. The killing of US Ambassador Stevens on 11 September 2012 was crucial for the mobilization of international support for Libyan forces trying to defeat Salafi-jihadi forces in the country.³⁹

31 Library of US Congress, “Al-Qaeda in Libya: A Profile,” 2012.

32 Amanda Thomas-Johnson, “‘Sorted’ by MI5: How UK Government Sent British-Libyans to Fight Gaddafi,” Middle East Eye, July 11, 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sorted-mi5-how-uk-government-sent-british-libyans-fight-gaddafi>.

33 Helen Pidd, “How Family and Libya Conflict Radicalised Manchester Arena Bomber,” The Guardian, March 2, 2023, sec. UK news, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/02/how-family-libya-conflict-radicalised-manchester-arena-bomber>.

34 Lydia Sizer, “Libya's Terrorism Challenge: Assessing the Salafi-Jihadi Threat” (Middle East Institute, 2017), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/libyas-terrorism-challenge-assessing-salafi-jihadi-threat>.

35 Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Others: Foreign Fighters in Libya” (The Washington Institute, January 16, 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/others-foreign-fighters-libya>.

36 Charles Lister, “Competition among Violent Islamist Extremists: Combating an Unprecedented Threat,” The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 668, no. 1 (November 1, 2016): 53–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716216668500>.

37 Aaron Y. Zelin, “Know Your Ansar Al-Sharia,” Foreign Policy (blog), September 21, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/21/know-your-ansar-al-sharia/>.

38 Banerji, “Did Ansar Al-Sharia Carry out Libya Attack?,” BBC News, September 12, 2012, sec. Africa, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-19575753>.

39 “S.Hrg. 114-784 – THE PATH FORWARD IN LIBYA,” March 3, 2016.

In May 2014, General Khalifa Haftar – a retired military officer who had defected in 1983 while fighting in Chad, lived in the US, and returned for the 2011 revolution– launched a military offensive with the so-called Libyan National Army (LNA) to rid Benghazi of terrorist groups – and with that the degradation of the group was on the horizon.⁴⁰ While wreaking local havoc, killing many innocent citizens, and lumping any opposing individuals and groups together under the banner of radical Islam and terrorism, Haftar managed to diminish the influence of Ansar al-Sharia. The group officially dissolved in 2017.⁴¹

While fighting against anyone considered radically Islamist, Haftar relied on militias from all over the country that he organized under the banner of the LNA – some of them with partially radical views and behaviors themselves, like Salafi-Madkhalis.⁴² Simultaneously to Ansar al-Sharia needing to fight Haftar, the intra-Salafi competition in Libya also picked up speed in June 2014 when the Islamic State (IS) declared a “Caliphate” in the territory it controlled in Iraq and Syria. This made IS very appealing to Libyan Salafi-jihadis – alongside Salafi-jihadis from around the world.⁴³

After Salafi-jihadi fighters streamed from Libya to Syria in 2012–13 to support the Syrian jihad once the removal of Qaddafi was achieved, the trajectory reversed itself in Spring 2014, aimed at bolstering the IS’s forays into establishing a base in Libya. Ultimately, IS-Libya was founded by a combination of pro-IS individuals based in Derna, returning Libyans and other foreign fighters in Syria’s Katibat al-Battar al-Libiyah (KBL), and defectors from Ansar al-Sharia. KBL was considered an elite group within IS in Syria – it was in charge of training fighters who then went on to conduct attacks in Europe.⁴⁴ The mobilization of foreign fighters was crucial for IS-Libya’s success – when establishing a presence initially as well as when ensuring governance in Sirte from 2015.⁴⁵

The appeal of the “Caliphate” is central to explain wider scale foreign fighter mobilization. Tunisians were heavily represented amongst IS-Libya foreign fighters – and this was expected as Tunisia borders Libya (and Tunisia had a strong track record of sending foreign fighters to Salafi-jihadi battlegrounds). But now fighters also came from sub-Saharan Africa or the UK to support IS’s Caliphate in Libya. These appeals were fortified by calls in social media, which the United Nations (UN) identified as a key point directing foreign fighter mobilization to Libya.⁴⁶ Ultimately, Libya became the “fourth-largest foreign fighter mobilization in global jihadist

40 Kristina Hummel, “Europe’s True Southern Frontier: The General, the Jihadis, and the High-Stakes Contest for Libya’s Fezzan Region” (CTC Westpoint, November 27, 2017), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/europes-true-southern-frontier-the-general-the-jihadis-and-the-high-stakes-contest-for-libyas-fezzan-region/>.

41 Reuters, “Libyan Islamist Group Ansar Al-Sharia Says It Is Dissolving,” Reuters, May 27, 2017, sec. everythingNews, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-idUSKBN18N0YR>.

42 Inga Kristina Trauthig and Guy Robert Eyre, “‘Quietist’ Salafis after the ‘Arab Revolts’ in Algeria and Libya (2011–2019): Between Insecurity and Political Subordination,” *Mediterranean Politics* 0, no. 0 (2023): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2023.2272474>.

43 Charlie Winter, “Apocalypse, Later: A Longitudinal Study of the Islamic State Brand,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 103–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2017.1393094>.

44 Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Others: Foreign Fighters in Libya” (The Washington Institute, January 16, 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/others-foreign-fighters-libya>.

45 UN Security Council, “Monitoring Team’s Report on the Terrorism Threat in Libya Posed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, Ansar al Charia and All Other Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Associated with al-Qaida Operating in Libya,” November 19, 2015, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n15/321/45/pdf/n1532145.pdf>.

46 UN Security Council, “Monitoring Team’s Report on the Terrorism Threat in Libya Posed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, Ansar al Charia and All Other Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Associated with al-Qaida Operating in Libya,” November 19, 2015, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n15/321/45/pdf/n1532145.pdf>.

history, behind only the [ongoing] war in Syria, the Afghan jihad of the 1980s, and the 2003 Iraq war.”⁴⁷

However, after having established some presence in Derna, IS-Libya's breakthrough came when they managed to establish governance in the coastal city of Sirte – and for that, they needed to exploit existing power struggles and gather local support. Haftar's Operation Dignity impacted the entire country and in the early months of 2015, the fighting was concentrated over the crucial oil facilities of the Sirte Basin. While Haftar's forces had grown influential in eastern parts of Libya (like Benghazi and Derna), he was also pushing westwards. In geographical terms, Sirte was deeply entrenched in this battle and, with the dominant military forces of the east and west more focused on fighting each other, IS managed to exploit the ensuing power vacuum.⁴⁸ Other local jihadi competitors, most prominently Ansar al-Shariah members in Sirte, started fearing the encroachment of Operation Dignity forces and hence sought to align themselves with stronger forces.⁴⁹ Ultimately, IS-Libya managed to portray itself as what they longed for: A jihadi force not characterized by gradualism and with clear support from the IS core that pushed for an unambiguous vision of governing. IS outmaneuvered Ansar al-Shariah in Sirte and several members pledged allegiance (*baya*) to the self-proclaimed Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.⁵⁰

Furthermore, the city of Sirte carries its own significance. As the hometown of Muammar Qaddafi, many local tribes were allied with the regime and Sirte became an emblem, a focal point for ire, for many in post-revolutionary Libya. It was also the literal target of anti-Qaddafi forces and NATO airpower.⁵¹ Following the overthrow of the regime, it was clear that Sirte had ended up on the wrong side of history and the victorious forces (many of them from Misrata) enacted revenge, such as detentions and executions, disrupting the existing social fabric of the city.⁵² IS's offer of violent rule provided local forces with retribution mechanisms to what they considered unfair treatment after 2011. This rationale by local tribes and communities was hence not driven by a bona fide alignment with IS's goals and ideology but rather an opportunistic cooperation focusing on short-term benefits.⁵³ By August 2015, the group had turned Sirte into its largest stronghold outside of its core territory in Iraq and Syria.

IS's presence in Sirte was ended in 2016 when the group was militarily defeated by Libyan forces under the umbrella of the al-Bunyan al-Marsous operation room (which translates to “solid, well-built structure/construction/wall” and was a coalition of Libyan forces, many from Misrata), with US airstrikes from Operation Odyssey proving crucial for the Libyan ground

47 Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Others: Foreign Fighters in Libya” (The Washington Institute, January 16, 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/others-foreign-fighters-libya>.

48 Frederic Wehrey and Emad Badi, “A Place of Distinctive Despair” (Carnegie Middle East Center – Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 8, 2018), <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/76997>.

49 Frederic Wehrey, “When the Islamic State Came to Libya” (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 8, 2018), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/10/when-islamic-state-came-to-libya-pub-75541>.

50 Emily Estelle, “A Strategy for Success in Libya” (American Enterprise Institute, 2017), <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/a-strategy-for-success-in-libya>.

51 Peter Bouckaert, “Death of a Dictator,” Human Rights Watch, October 16, 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/10/16/death-dictator/bloody-vengeance-sirte>.

52 Charles Lister, “Competition among Violent Islamist Extremists: Combating an Unprecedented Threat,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 668, no. 1 (November 1, 2016): 53–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716216668500>.

53 Three interviews with citizens on Sirte in 2020 and 2021.

offensive.⁵⁴ By December 2016, IS’s 16-month reign in Libya was over and the group had lost all its territories due to an externally-supported Libyan military coalition as well as the group’s brutality eradicating local support.⁵⁵

The horrors of having lived under IS-Libya’s rule, however, still haunt people in Sirte – many of whom had fled the city and came back to only rubble.⁵⁶ One local council woman described how she still tries to envision a better future but “Da’esh ruined everything.”⁵⁷ Other interviewees underscored that the city was not only physically left in ruins after IS-Libya rule, but also that social fabrics were heavily sabotaged, with lasting impacts. Tribal rivalries that had existed before IS-Libya’s rule had hardened as the terrorist group worked with local partners, especially from previous Qaddafi-loyal tribes. Ansar al-Sharia and the IS-Libya both managed to dominate and de facto govern parts of the country in 2012–13 and 2015–16, respectively. Despite their ability to create local governance models, their successes were comparatively short-lived – largely due to their alienation of local and international forces. Still, IS-Libya’s structures and operations were sophisticated and due to several outlined factors, the threats they present to Libya and further afield are of ongoing, legitimate concern.⁵⁸

54 Patrick Wintour, “Isis Loses Control of Libyan City of Sirte,” *The Guardian*, December 5, 2016, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/05/isis-loses-control-of-libyan-city-of-sirte>.

55 Patrick Wintour, “Isis Loses Control of Libyan City of Sirte,” *The Guardian*, December 5, 2016, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/05/isis-loses-control-of-libyan-city-of-sirte>.

56 Wehrey and Badi, “A Place of Distinctive Despair.”

57 Interview with a local councilwoman in 2019.

58 Inga Kristina Trauthig, “Assessing the Islamic State in Libya” (Europol, December 6, 2021), <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/publications/assessing-islamic-state-in-libya>; Emily Estelle, “Al Qaeda and the Islamic State Will Be the Winners of the Libyan Civil War,” *Critical Threats* (blog), April 10, 2019, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/al-qaeda-and-the-islamic-state-will-be-the-winners-of-the-libyan-civil-war>; Henrik Gråtrud and Vidar Benjamin Skretting, “Ansar Al-Sharia in Libya: An Enduring Threat,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 1 (2017): 40–53; Mohamed, “IntelBrief: Libya’s Instability Worsens, Adding Threats to the Broader Region,” *The Soufan Center* (blog), August 29, 2023, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2023-august-29/>.

Overview of IS-Libya's major attacks in Europe and snapshot of activity after its loss of territory

INSIDE LIBYA AFTER LOSS OF GOVERNANCE

DATE & LOCATION	ATTACK DETAILS	BACKGROUND
2 May 2018, Tripoli, The High National Election Commission (HNEC)	Two suicide bombers entered the HNEC. 16 people were killed and 19 injured. Amaq claimed responsibility that day.	IS-Libya targeted the most important institution for elections in Libya already indicating its opposition to potential elections, The group also capitalized on this attack to signal strength in the capital.
10 September 2018, The National Oil Corporation (NOC), Tripoli	Suicide attack on NOC building by three attackers. 4 killed and 11 people were injured. Nashir claimed responsibility the next day.	IS-Libya targeted Libya's primary source of wealth – for both western and eastern authorities, The group also indicated its opposition to ceasefire talks between Libyan stakeholders from the East and West.
25 December 2018, The Foreign Ministry, Tripoli	Four attackers undertook a suicide attack on Foreign Ministry. 3 people were killed and 21 injured. Amaq claimed responsibility the next day.	IS-Libya targeted the Foreign Ministry and killed several prominent Libyan politicians who had spoken up in favor of elections. IS-Libya fervently opposed elections. It conducted this attack with the ideological justification of opposing elections but also to install a climate of fear regarding democratic politics generally. The groups also aimed to scare foreign diplomats reassessing the potential of returning diplomatic outposts to Tripoli.

ATTACKS IN EUROPE

DATE & LOCATION	ATTACK DETAILS	BACKGROUND
19 December 2016, Berlin, Germany	A truck was deliberately driven into the Berlin Christmas market at Breitscheidplatz. 13 people were killed and 56 injured. Amaq claimed responsibility the next day.	The perpetrator, Anis Amri, had sent a video in which he pledged allegiance to Abubakr al-Baghdadi to IS-Libya two months before the attack. Amri had an 'IS mentors' (likely Tunisians in Libya), who sent him not only inspirational, ideological material, but also instructional guidance on recommended modi operandi for attacks.
22 May 2017, Manchester, UK	Suicide bombing in the Manchester Arena following a concert. 22 people were killed and 1,017 injured. Amaq claimed responsibility the next day.	The perpetrator, Salman Abedi, a UK citizen of Libyan descent, physically went to Libya, where he reportedly met IS members, amongst other Jihadis, who inspired but likely also helped with planning the attack.

Table 1: Overview of major attacks (defined by more than 10 people killed and injured while also aiming at high profile targets like state institutions or large public gatherings)

Ever since territorial defeat in Sirte, IS-Libya's organization and views from the outside shifted. First, as a continuous possible staging post to threaten Europe due to Libya's geographical proximity with one of the main migrant routes to Europe;⁵⁹ second, to being seen as a refuge for IS forces under pressure in Iraq and Syria;⁶⁰ and third, it was seen as a network of sleeper cells waiting for the right opportunity to rise again.⁶¹ The latter is the most pertinent view – ever since the expulsion from Sirte, the group has been unable to build a proper base or even to govern in Libya. Instead, the group is chased around the country: Following the loss of its base near Ghodwa, in the south of the country, the group moved to Haruj and began operating again in April 2019, until it was expelled again by the LNA.⁶² The LNA as well as Rada in Tripoli continue to target IS-Libya – and use (alleged) arrests and killings of IS-Libya members for their legitimacy as security forces. For example, in September 2020, the LNA spokesman Ahmed al-Mismari said his army killed Abu Moaz al-Iraqi, leader of IS in North Africa, during a raid in Sebha (Fezzan's capital)⁶³ or in August 2023, the Prime Minister of the overstaying Government of National Unity (GNU), Abdulhamid Dbeibah claimed Rada had captured an IS-Libya leader in Tripoli.⁶⁴

While the group's overall activity over the last years has been relatively weak, the volatility and geography of the country as well as prevailing grievances remain pull factors for IS-Libya, which makes the group potentially threatening, even if the organization is currently negligible.⁶⁵ The below table gives an overview of IS-Libya activity over a year after they were expelled from Sirte, based on a twenty-month data collection period.⁶⁶ It shows a total of 87 incidents, broken down into the three categories of incidents to be recorded based on the inclusion criteria.

59 Christopher Livesay and Alessandro Pavone, "ISIS Regroups to Attack a Fragmented Libya" (PBS Newshour, September 30, 2018), <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/isis-regroups-attack-fragmented-libya>.

60 Rikar Hussein and Nisan Ahmado, "Islamic State Regrouping in Libyan Desert, Experts Warn," VOA, September 29, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-regrouping-libyan-desert-experts-warn/4050753.html>.

61 Sudarsan Raghavan, "Libya's Civil War Creates Opening for ISIS Return as Counterterrorism Effort Falters," Washington Post, November 24, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/libyas-civil-war-creates-opening-for-isis-return-as-counterterrorism-effort-falters/2019/11/21/e78745c0-056c-11ea-9118-25d6bd37dfb1_story.html.

62 Inga Kristina Trauthig, "Islamic State in Libya – From Force to Farce" (International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), 2020).

63 Reuters, "Eastern Libyan Forces Say They Killed Islamic State Leader | Reuters," Reuters, September 23, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN26E3BV/>.

64 AfricaNews, "Libya: Islamic State Leader Captured – Government," Africanews, August 25, 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/08/25/libya-islamic-state-leader-captured-government/>.

65 Inga Kristina Trauthig, "Islamic State in Libya – From Force to Farce" (International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), 2020).

66 Data was collected using open-source-based research tools, such as Tweetdeck and Facebook Search. The searches were guided by a keyword list in English and Arabic – some searches combined with operators – that remained the same throughout the research period. The data collection period assessed for this paper was from 1 March 2018 until 31 October 2019. During this period, all Twitter and Facebook posts were collected that claimed IS activity in Libya in the following regards: (1) Attacks attributed to IS (2) Establishment of checkpoints attributed to IS and/or IS attacks on checkpoints (3) Kidnappings attributed to IS Conversely this means many claims of IS activity did not make it into the database, most markedly among them: (1) Arrests of alleged IS members (2) Assassination or emancipation of alleged IS members (3) Release of propaganda material by IS (4) Rumours of alleged IS and al-Qa'ida cooperation; (5) Failed IS attacks (which are prominently featured especially on LNA-affiliated accounts) The decision not to include the release of propaganda material in this database, which would help to indicate IS's strength on the ground in Libya, was taken due to the fact that such propaganda material's origins are often difficult to determine and, by definition, it is a means with which groups willingly exaggerate their stature. However, assessments of this material have been and will continue to be included in later parts of the paper as propaganda material provides valuable, additional glimpses into IS's self-perception and attempts at inflating its relative standing. Similarly, this report has opted not assess IS in Libya based on IS reports of its activity as the group is intrinsically interested in over-reporting its activity. In addition, the reliance on open-source methods adds to the traceability and replicability of the research. Given the study's focus, retweets or shares picking up alleged IS activity were not included in the count. Comments on the alleged IS activity, however, were considered in the analysis.

The first is IS-affiliated attacks. A total of 40 attacks were noted with a count of 93 IS-inflicted casualties. These IS-affiliated attacks ranged from high-profile attacks, such as the assault on the National Election Commission on 2 May 2018 as well as more low-key – but therefore more frequent – attacks, such as in southern Libya on 23 November 2018, when IS members launched an assault on the town of Tazirbu, resulting in 8 people dead, or on 4 May, when IS attacked the LNA's 160 Brigade Jabril Baba training camp in Sebha, leaving eight LNA members dead.⁶⁷

Next to IS-affiliated attacks, the database records 30 accounts of IS activity aiming to signal presence and strength by erecting checkpoints. Prototypical for this type of activity are, for example, the movements in early October 2018 when IS members erected mobile checkpoints south of the group's previous stronghold, the coastal city of Sirte, along the Qasr Abu-Hadi-Waddan road.

The third and final category of incidents is IS-affiliated kidnappings, which amount to 17 registered kidnappings during the data collection period. These kidnappings incorporate civilian as well as military incidents, such as the kidnapping of two LNA officers while they were attending a social gathering in the desert area near Waddan on 26 June 2018 or the occasion in March 2019 when IS kidnapped three young men allegedly affiliated with local government authorities in Ghodwa, near Sebha.

COLLECTION PERIOD	1 MARCH 2018 – 31 OCTOBER 2019
Total Incidents	87
Attacks	40
IS Movements/Checkpoints	30
Kidnappings	17

Table 2: IS-Libya activity March 2018 – November 2019

The data creates the impression that IS was not aspiring to control territory in populated areas in Libya (or even concentrated on controlling one city or region in Libya) but was rather aiming to create insecurity in all parts of the country. IS established or attacked checkpoints, raided and occupied urban police stations and kidnapped local notables for potential prisoner exchanges or ransom on several occasions. In addition, the group carried out the three major attacks in 2018. It also tried again in 2018 to take control of parts of the Mabruk oil field, signifying its determination to attack the main source of income in Libya.⁶⁸

The overall aim in all parts of the country seems to be to generate a feeling of insecurity and distrust in existing structures, such as the GNA in the west, the LNA in the east, and LNA and regional tribal structures in the south. The startling attacks in Tripoli all targeted key institutions of Libyan politics. As regards the attack on the electoral commission, the prospect of any democratic procedure like national elections has attracted the attention of those who wish to disrupt such activities.⁶⁹ The interruptions that IS was able to achieve in the country's political developments exacerbated a feeling of insecurity regarding political processes and dissatisfaction with government services, such as security provision.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ For this data no distinction is drawn between civilian and military casualties

⁶⁸ "OPEC : Libya," accessed June 9, 2024, https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/166.htm.

⁶⁹ BBC Monitoring on Twitter, 2 May 2018, twitter.com/BBCMonitoring/status/991686100799381504.

⁷⁰ International Republican Institute's Center for Insights in Survey Research, Libya Poll, 15 May 2019, www.iri.org/sites/default/files/libya_poll_january_2019.pdf.

Furthermore, IS in Libya needs to be interpreted as one branch of a bigger group with its base in the Levant that, while exhibiting local idiosyncrasies, remains tied to a bigger idea. Therefore, IS in Libya employs a double strategy, since it must (a) show that it implements IS's ideologically driven objectives (i.e. destroying kufr in the form of high-profile targets) and (b) remain a relevant force in the country, safeguarding its base in this geographically advantageous position. For example, the May 2018 attack on the HNEC was claimed by IS first via its Nashir News Agency media outlet on the messaging app Telegram; in a follow-up statement, IS emphasized that the attack in Tripoli was a response to a recent message from the group's central leadership urging attacks on election targets, referring to the IS spokesman's April 2018 speech.⁷¹ The group thus continued to harbor aspirations to increase its visibility by perpetrating attacks on symbolic targets that sent strategic messages in line with the group's ideology.

However, in the more recent rounds of civil war in Libya, such as the third wave triggered by Haftar's offensive on Tripoli in 2019, IS was not a main issue at stake. Instead, LNA and Rada use their continuous fight against IS-Libya for leverage domestically and internationally.⁷² However, the group has survived after it was expelled from Sirte and has been able to assert itself in a context of widespread conflict and violence. Europe is almost immediately affected by developments in Libya and the country has been tumbling from one cycle of violence to the next. This uncertainty could once again strengthen terrorist groups, including IS, which had carried out a spate of attacks in Libya in 2018 and tried to capitalize on following momentums.⁷³ However, so far, the group has not managed to live up to its aspirations in the post-Sirte era. Of course, this also is a consequence of several US airstrikes, such as those in late September 2019 that killed 43 alleged IS militants.⁷⁴

In sum, IS-Libya did not vanish after being driven out of Sirte but rather manifested itself via (a) noteworthy attacks on institutions connected to the state (only in 2018) and (b) less prominent but more frequent activities in desert regions.⁷⁵ The attacks (outlined below) and their geographical spread signify that they were attacks driven by favorable circumstances – attacks of opportunity – rather than a coordinated campaign.⁷⁶ This two-pronged strategy is harmful to progressive political and institutional developments that aim at Libyan state-building since it jeopardizes the already volatile political process.⁷⁷

71 "Islamic State spokesman says 'battle has just begun'", BBC Monitoring, 23 April 2018, [monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1dp3x67](https://www.bbc.com/news/monitoring-45411111).

72 Mary Fitzgerald, "Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism: Libya Case Study" (ICCT, December 20, 2020), <https://www.icct.nl/publication/mitigating-impact-media-reporting-terrorism-libya-case-study>.

73 Trauthig, "In #Libya IS never vanished – now with #LNA and powerful western militias occupied with fighting one another, #IslamicState will naturally try to use it to its advantage: Attack in Fuqaha yesterday serves as a warning", 9 April 2019, twitter.com/inga_kris/status/1115532785631027200.

74 United States Africa Command, "U.S. Africa Command airstrike targets ISIS-Libya", 30 September 2019, <https://www.afcom.mil/media-room/pressrelease/32238/u-s-africa-command-airstrike-targets-isis-libya>.

75 Lachlan Willson and Jason Pack, "The Islamic State's Revitalization in Libya and Its Post-2016 War of Attrition," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point 12, no. CTC Sentinel (March 21, 2019), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/islamic-states-revitalization-libya-post-2016-war-attrition/>.

76 Aaron Zelin, "The Islamic State in Libya Has Yet to Recover," The Washington Institute (blog), December 6, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-state-libya-has-yet-recover>.

77 It is important to mention, however, that the GNA and the Presidential Council were established after major political and military factions in the west and the south of the country agreed on their formation in Tripoli in March 2017. These processes took place relatively peacefully without triggering large-scale violent incidents and various groups have worked with the international community on the fight against IS and illegal migration: Virginie Collombier, "Libya: Moving beyond the transitional mood", Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping Geopolitical Shifts, Regional Order and Domestic Transformations, Future Notes no. 11 (April 2018), www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_fn_11.pdf. Nonetheless, while there has been initial progress in

In addition, the presence and activities of IS in Libya have been repeatedly exploited by military actors, such as Haftar, who lump together adversarial forces and denounce them as IS terrorists.⁷⁸ In the second Libyan civil war of 2014 Haftar re-emerged, installing himself and the LNA as a committed “anti-Islamist” fighting force. This narrative of “Islamist forces” and “terrorist forces” fighting “anti-Islamist” or “liberal” forces in Libya – with Haftar leading the latter group – has been attacked and shown to be untenable by many analysts over recent years.⁷⁹ While there have been occasions in which the LNA was fighting jihadi groups, the narrative is still simplified.⁸⁰ However, the attention attracted by fighting supposedly terrorist elements still attracts regional and international backing and will therefore continue to be exploited in a conflict that has come to be defined by international meddling.

IS-Libya’s Heyday

Turning now to the examination of IS-Libya’s heyday four main questions guide the analysis:

Who and what was IS-Libya? How did the Tarabulus province in Libya become IS’s third biggest province generally? How did IS-Libya develop organizationally? And to what extent was IS-Libya innovative or simply different from IS core?

The main arguments are that during its heyday IS-Libya was closely linked to Islamic State core in terms of direct knowledge transplantation (in other words, ideological guidance but also personnel). At the same time, local dynamics pushed IS-Libya in practice to diverge from some Islamic State core guidance regularly – for example, due to tribal rivalries and its close geographical linkages to sub-Saharan Africa.

PLANNING IS-LIBYA

In November 2014, former IS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi had endorsed the Libyan provinces (wilayat) of Cyrenaica (Barqa) in Eastern Libya, Fezzan in Southern Libya and Tripoli (Tarabulus) in Western Libya in November 2014.⁸¹ Sirte became the headquarters of the Tripoli province and, over the course of 2015, rose to be IS’s strongest province outside Iraq and Syria.⁸² A student in Derna remembered “There was talk everywhere [on the streets of Derna] about Baghdadi talking about Libya (...) one friend of mine told me: ‘this is going to save us.’ He was convinced that Daesh would unite groups, and we would all soon live in a Caliphate (...)” To bolster the spreading of Baghdadi’s message, IS’s official communications also picked up the Libyan case.

countering IS, such as forcing it out of Sirte in December 2016, the failure of an inclusive deal deepened the prevalent political division, separating the deal’s supporters from its opponents and leading to new fractures within both factions.

- 78 “Widespread use of ‘Daeshi’ in Libya began sometime between 2013 and 2015, when the Islamic State began carrying out operations in the country. In its current usage, it is often employed against anyone who opposes General Haftar and the LNA, falsely conflating any opponents with Islamist extremists.” in Lacroix, “Social Media and Conflict in Libya”, p. 8.
- 79 This narrative is fueled by all sides: For example, Ali Sallabi has been relying on similar rhetoric and the consequences of this risky game of labelling the competitor a terrorist, is a gamble that many actors are participating in. In addition, external actors were able to be more involved (visibly) partly because of the terrorism labelling game.
- 80 Frederic Wehrey, “Quiet no more”, Carnegie Middle East Centre, 13 October 2016, [carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64846](https://www.carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64846).
- 81 Emily Estelle and Katherine Zimmermann, “A Strategy for Success in Libya” (American Enterprise Institute (AEI), November 2017), <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/A-Strategy-for-Success-in-Libya.pdf>.
- 82 Since 2018, however, there is only one province in Libya – in line with IS’s consolidation and necessity to focus efforts in Libya on survival.

A few months after official recognition by Baghdadi, Libya featured prominently in *Dabiq*, IS's English-language virtual magazine (March 2015, 8th issue). In a piece called "The Libyan Arena," IS denounces the parliaments in Libya and refers to Libya as the "ideal land for hijra" especially for those who cannot come to Syria. The article emphasizes that IS-Libya is prospering and expanding. This was appealing to Salafi-jihadis from Tunisia or sub-Saharan Africa because it meant that a motivated adherent did not need to make the arduous journey to Syria and Iraq to live within part of the Caliphate.⁸³

With this, IS continued its tradition of exploiting the concept of hijra as a tool for establishing governance and ruling territory – relying on foreign fighters.⁸⁴ Before promoting Libya, IS had already been arguing that "the first priority is to perform hijra from wherever you are to the Islamic State, from Dar al-kufr to Dar al-Islam. Rush to the shade of the Islamic State with your parents, siblings, spouses and children." (*Dabiq*, 2nd issue). In IS's explanations of and urges for hijra, two aspects are particularly important for the rise of IS-Libya. First, IS delegitimized many of the Middle Eastern countries that practice Islam, justifying that the only true Dar al-Islam exists in the Islamic State – meaning that Libyans should also migrate to IS territory in Libya, where Muslim laws are fully implemented; IS's wilayat are included in its definition of Dar al-Islam, which is crucial for foreigners deciding how/where to join the Caliphate. According to Zeiger et al, hijra is both obligatory (it is required) and urgent (even though they are not in the time period of the Prophet, they should still migrate) for IS.⁸⁵

Second, next to these ideological pull factors, the prospect of joining IS-Libya also came with potential career advances for existing IS fighters in Iraq and Syria. Many foreigners were part of the local leadership: mostly Iraqis and Tunisians held top positions, maintaining close ties between the Libyan branch and the core group in Iraq and Syria.⁸⁶ These potentials for some IS members complemented the ideological pull of the Caliphate which had acted as its main recruitment tool for foreigners in Iraq and Syria.⁸⁷

After having identified Libya as a promising province, IS-Libya consolidated efforts in Libya organizationally to move towards Sirte and establish governance there. Four main dynamics characterize the set-up and ultimate conduct of IS-Libya's governance in Sirte. First, the exploitation of local opportunities related to tribal vengeance and the 2014 Libyan civil war; second, the conversion of existing jihadi structures (ASL) into IS-Libya; third, the joining of foreign IS leaders with local appointees and especially local cooperation (and eventual pledging of allegiance) by law enforcement; fourth, the potentials for innovation due to Libya's remoteness from IS's ideological heartland. The next sections will provide more details on these four main points.

83 Dion Nissenbaum and Maria Abi-Habib, "Islamic State Solidifies Foothold in Libya to Expand Reach," Wall Street Journal, May 8, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-solidifies-foothold-in-libya-to-expand-reach-1431989697>.

84 Matan Uberman and Shaul Shay, "Hijrah According to the Islamic State: An Analysis of Dabiq," Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses 8, no. 9 (2016): 16–20.

85 Sara Zeiger et al., "Planting the Seeds of the Poisonous Tree: Establishing a System of Meaning Through ISIS Education," ISIS Files (George Washington University, February 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4079/poe.02.2021.01>.

86 Joana Cook, Haid Haid, and Inga Trauthig, "'Jurisprudence Beyond the State: An Analysis of Jihadist 'Justice' in Yemen, Syria and Libya," Studies in Conflict & Terrorism 0, no. 0 (June 10, 2020): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1776958>; Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Others: Foreign Fighters in Libya" (The Washington Institute, January 16, 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/others-foreign-fighters-libya>.

87 Charlie Winter, "Making Sense of Jihadi Stratcom: The Case of the Islamic State," Perspectives on Terrorism 13, no. 1 (2019): 53–61.

EXPLOITING LOCAL OPPORTUNITIES

Being pushed out of Derna was a crucial push factor of IS-Libya’s focus on Sirte. The two critical pull factors were Sirte’s convenient geographic location (in the oil-rich Sirte Basin and with good linkages to Libya’s vast South and Sebha specifically)⁸⁸ and Sirte’s history after 2011 which was defined by tribal vengeance and lawlessness.

FIRST ATTEMPTS AT GOVERNANCE IN DERNA

Radical Salafis and Islamists had called Derna their home for several decades – already before the 2011 revolution and specifically during the insurgencies against Qaddafi in the 1980/90s.⁸⁹ Further, historically Derna had been a cradle for other rebellious insurgents as well – such as when the Green Mountain hinterland south of the city was used as a hideout for Omar al-Mukhtar, Libya’s much revered independence hero, when fighting the previous Italian colonists for several years.⁹⁰ This hinterland also allowed anti-Qaddafi rebels to survive in and around Derna for some time. Finally, and relatedly, Derna boosted a strong jihadi foreign fighter contingent – with some analysts claiming that Derna “contributed more foreign fighters per capita to al-Qa’ida in Iraq than any other town in the Middle East.”⁹¹

With these radical Islamist roots, IS-Libya saw Derna as a natural entry point to Libya in 2014. A local resident remembered a conversation with an IS-Libya fighter, in which the latter lamented that IS-Libya was not welcomed with open arms in Derna – according to the latter, IS-Libya was expecting jihadis in Derna to pledge allegiance to Baghdadi en masse.⁹² Given the intra-jihadi rivalries this might seem naïve but the lamenting IS-Libya fighter also added that he knew some DMSC members personally and did not understand how they did not see that IS-Libya was the future.

Nevertheless, IS-Libya still managed to establish itself locally and reap some benefits from Derna’s post-revolutionary chaos, remoteness from governmental resources, and radical Islamist leanings amongst some parts of the population.⁹³ IS-Libya managed to establish governance in parts of central Derna in 2014. Three interviewed local residents (one woman and two men) vividly remembered several “book burning events” and the IS-Libya’s moral police controlling the streets for strict adherence to their codes, such as male guardianship of women.⁹⁴ The woman also mentioned that she used to always dress conservatively but after having been harassed by IS-Libya a few times for improper behavior she would go out in an abaya (begrudgingly). A corresponding example can be found in Aymenn al-Tamimi’s archives

88 Unlike in Iraq and Syria, ISIL never earned millions by selling oil on the black market because it is dominated by Libyans. Reportedly, ISIL mainly relied on ransoms paid for abducted prisoners, checkpoints on the crucial roads around Sirte, and on state salaries paid to local members in Libya, where most adults remain on the state payroll for local finances <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN0PY1A6/>. However, that does not mean ISIL did not try to take over Sirte’s oil fields regularly. The oil economy was also helpful for them as they would abduct foreign workers and try to get ransom for them, too. <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN0PY1A6/>.

89 Marius K. Deeb, “Militant Islam and Its Critics: The Case of Libya,” in *Islamism and Secularism in North Africa*, ed. John Ruedy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 1996), 187–97, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-61373-1_11.

90 Alex Crawford, *Colonel Gaddafi’s Hat* (London: Collins, 2012); Ulf Laessing and Ayman Warfalli, “Expulsion from Derna Bastion May Show Limits for Islamic State in Libya,” Reuters (blog), July 14, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN0PY1A6/>.

91 Jomana Karadsheh et al., “ISIS Comes to Libya,” CNN (blog), November 18, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/11/18/world/isis-libya/index.html>.

92 Interview with a resident of Derna in 2022.

93 Omar Ashour, “Between ISIS and a Failed State: The Saga of Libyan Islamists,” Brookings Institution, 2015.

94 Interviews with residents from Derna in 2021 and 2022.

from the Dirwan al-H isba although IS-Libya does not clarify what they consider the “revealing women’s clothes.”⁹⁵

Specimen 1F: Diwan al-Hisbah (Derna: Cyrenaica Province, Libya) on women’s clothing (October 2014)

Islamic State
Wilayat Barqa: Derna

Thanks be to God and prayers and peace be upon the Messenger of God, his family, companions and whoever is close to him. As for what follows:

Imam Muslim narrated on the authority of Abu al-Hayaj al-Asadi- may God be pleased with him: he said: "Ali- may God be pleased with him- said to me: 'Do I not induce you to what the Messenger of God [PBUH] induced me? Do not allow a statue to stand unless you have obliterated it or a grave raised unless you have levelled it.'"

My brother in God:

This is an order from the Prophet (PBUH) to demolish statues- and this order is to prevent the step towards idolatry- for thus in the statues is resemblance to God's creation.

And there is another order of warning:

It is regarding the display of revealing women's clothes, and it is one of the things by which many people have been enticed...we offer this [warning] as sincere and affectionate advice for you, for the believers are sincere [?], while the munafiqeen [hypocrites/lukewarm] are swindlers.

These efforts at governance were supported by IS core—including financial support. During its early days, the United Nations considered IS-Libya to have mostly benefited from local smuggling and other criminal revenues.⁹⁶ Ultimately, however, the intra-Jihadi competition in Derna, coupled with the real and perceived foreignness of IS-Libya (versus al-Qa’ida affiliated jihadis like the Derna Mujahedin Shura Council), led to a relative short period of IS-Libya implementing its vision on the city.⁹⁷ Even when Haftar’s Operation Dignity started targeting the city more heavily, the Jihadis did not come together and fight jointly against their common enemy. Instead a three-way conflict between IS-Libya, al-Qa’ida affiliated Jihadis and the LNA ensued. Exemplifying this hodgepodge was Hafeth al-Daba’s claim that the LNA had bombed the city prison that held suspected IS militants – he was a spokesman for the DMSC.⁹⁸

In the end, local reports indicated that IS-Libya had not only sustained significant losses in neighborhood battles in the outskirts of Derna⁹⁹ with the DMSC, but also that local support deteriorated¹⁰⁰ and occasionally even spilled into local armed resistance against IS-Libya. One example was when seven people were killed at a protest against the influx of foreign jihadists and the killing of a commander of the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade in Derna. According to Reuters, one local resident exclaimed: “People had had enough of Daesh (...) [and] The Abu

95 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents>

96 UN Security Council, “Monitoring Team’s Report on the Terrorism Threat in Libya Posed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, Ansar al Charia and All Other Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Associated with al-Qaida Operating in Libya,” November 19, 2015, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n15/321/45/pdf/n1532145.pdf>.

97 Thomas Joscelyn, “Islamic State Fighters Retreat from Bases Outside Derna, Libya | FDD’s Long War Journal,” April 16, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/04/islamic-state-fighters-retreat-from-bases-outside-derna-libya.php>.

98 BBC, “Islamic State ‘forced out’ of Key Libyan City of Derna,” BBC News, April 21, 2016, sec. Africa, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36104728>.

99 Al Fatayih to which ISIL moved in summer 2015 after being pushed out of Derna’s center.

100 International Crisis Group (ICG), “Exploiting Disorder: Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State,” March 14, 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/exploiting-disorder-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state>.

Salim Brigade has enjoyed some support going back to the (anti-Qaddafi) revolution.”¹⁰¹ The Islamic State confirmed via its Amaq News Agency that its militants had “retreated from [Al Fatayih] area (...) in Libya’s northeast” (22 April 2016). In the statement, however, IS was careful to avoid any loss of control and instead portrayed the Derna withdrawal as tactical, – underlining that the Barqa IS-Libya fighters had succeeded in breaking through a siege (by the DMSC) and hence was able to move on to Libya’s South and West.¹⁰² Following IS-Libya’s loss of control in Derna, shops and banks immediately reopened, but the city continued to struggle and would face heartbreaking hurdles over the next few years, including LNA’s relentless bombing and 2023’s devastating floods.¹⁰³

STRENGTHENING IS-LIBYA IN SIRTE

IS-Libya’s emergence in Sirte developed slightly later but then in parallel to the group’s emergence in Derna. However, the group became much stronger in Sirte than Derna – implementing its vision and governance for over a year, and becoming IS’s third strongest province. This was surprising to some as Libya is void of the sectarian divisions that IS so aptly capitalized on in Iraq especially.¹⁰⁴ To some extent, however, IS-Libya was able to replace the exploitation of sectarian divisions with the exploitation of tribal divisions and post-2011 grievances.

To start with, the dominance of IS-Libya as the ruling force in Sirte developed in parallel to the national civil war – a war defined by two coalitions of armed groups vying for national power: Libya Dawn, a western-based coalition of Islamists and powerful local militias (such as from Misrata) versus Operation Dignity, subsumed under the LNA and an amalgamation of eastern tribal groups (some with religious undertones) and disaffected military units.¹⁰⁵ By 2015, the main battles took place in the Sirte Basin, with each side aiming to take control of the oil facilities. While the focus on the Sirte Basin intensified, the Jihadi build-up in Sirte was neglected. With the dominant military forces of East and West more focused on fighting each other, IS exploited the ensuing power vacuum.¹⁰⁶

Additionally, Sirte’s population carried strong grievances. The rudimentary explanation is that Sirte was one of the two cities in Libya which stayed loyal to Qaddafi until the end, and so experienced a ferocious assault by rebels and NATO airpower (the other being Bani Walid) – signifying ongoing opposition to the post-revolutionary political establishment which aimed to rid itself of any Qaddafi links (similarly to Iraq’s de-Baathification, Libya implemented

¹⁰¹ Laessing and Warfalli, “Expulsion from Derna Bastion May Show Limits for Islamic State in Libya.” ASB had close links with and was amongst the forces establishing the DMSC. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/04/islamic-state-fighters-retreat-from-bases-outside-derna-libya.php>.

¹⁰² Joscelyn, “Islamic State Fighters Retreat from Bases Outside Derna, Libya | FDD’s Long War Journal.”

¹⁰³ Human Rights Watch, “Libya: Mass Extra-Judicial Execution,” November 29, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/11/29/libya-mass-extra-judicial-execution>; Human Rights Watch, “Libya: Derna Flood Response Costs Lives,” December 6, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/06/libya-derna-flood-response-costs-lives>.

¹⁰⁴ Frederic Wehrey, “Libya’s Revolution at Two Years: Perils and Achievements,” *Mediterranean Politics* 18, no. 1 (March 1, 2013): 112–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2013.764655>; Laessing and Warfalli, “Expulsion from Derna Bastion May Show Limits for Islamic State in Libya.”

¹⁰⁵ Frederic Wehrey and Emad Badi, “A Place of Distinctive Despair” (Carnegie Middle East Center – Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 8, 2018), <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/76997>.

¹⁰⁶ Inga Kristina Trauthig, “Islamic State in Libya – From Force to Farce” (International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), 2020).

purging processes under the Political Isolation Law).¹⁰⁷ Sirte's loyalty to Qaddafi triggered retributions and maltreatment of the local populations by revolutionary armed groups – many from Misrata.¹⁰⁸ The armed groups looted homes indiscriminately and conducted executions of residents often solely on the basis of affiliation to the Qaddadfa or Warfalla tribe (and hence suspected Qaddafi loyalists). This ensuing animosity between Sirtawi tribes and Misratan forces became a defining characteristic of Sirte and partly facilitated the growth of IS-Libya there.¹⁰⁹

However, behind the cliché characterization of a loyalist bastion, Sirte's identity and history is complex. With a population of only around 150,000, the city comprises over 20 tribes.¹¹⁰ The most prominent of these—the Warfalla, the Qaddadfa, the Awlad Soliman, and the Firjan—are crucially connected to tribal kin across Libya who settled in Sirte because of the city's central location connecting Libya's East, West and South – with access to the Mediterranean. Qaddafi, who was born in a village close to Sirte, promoted the city as an enclave for his favored tribes and elites – even moving several state institutions to the city.¹¹¹ In short, Sirte and its residents had it comparatively well before 2011.

The 2011 revolution pushed the city not only into a severely diminished political and economic position, but also into a severe identity crisis. The following months carried far-reaching changes for the city's social structure, including local conflict-resolution processes, and tribal hierarchies. Residents of Sirte were largely at the whim of new powers, such as powerful Misratan forces who assigned some political posts to a local Sirte tribe with roots in Misrata—the Ma'dan. Tribal resistance to IS-Libya, which was so forceful in other parts of Libya or the Middle East¹¹² was low in Sirte. By 2013, the previously powerful tribes were largely demoralized, embarrassed and divided. Three members of the Soliman tribe described how the fall of Qaddafi was seen as a misfortune that removed the political system and attacked the social structures of Libya in shocking ways. Therefore, reliance on previous tribal guarantees and norms was making everyone insecure.¹¹³ By offering the outlook of repentance, IS-Libya was able to enlist members of former Qaddafi loyalists (especially the Qaddadfa, Warfalla, and Magharba) as they considered IS-Libya as potential protection against the Misratans or, at that point, the lesser of two evils.¹¹⁴

IS-Libya took over the city step by step – controlling the radio station, the Wataniya television studio, the immigration center, Ibn Sina Hospital, the University of Sirte, and local government buildings. After controlling large swaths of the city, they installed a local leader in February 2015: Usamah Karamah, a relative of a former senior Qaddafi intelligence officer.¹¹⁵

107 Eric Knecht, "The Politics of Libya's Political Isolation Law," Atlantic Council (blog), February 28, 2013, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-politics-of-libya-s-political-isolation-law/>; Smith, "Libya's Political Isolation Law: Confusion and Charade," openDemocracy (blog), May 15, 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/libyas-political-isolation-law-confusion-and-charade/>; Human Rights Watch, "Libya: Reject 'Political Isolation Law,'" Human Rights Watch (blog), May 4, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/05/04/libya-reject-political-isolation-law>.

108 Frederic Wehrey, *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

109 Wehrey and Badi, "A Place of Distinctive Despair."

110 Virginie Collombier, "Sirte's Tribes Under the Islamic State: From Civil War to Global Jihadism," in *Tribes and Global Jihadism*, ed. Virginie Collombier and Olivier Roy (Oxford University Press, 2018), 0, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190864545.003.0008>.

111 Ibid.

112 Thomas Hüsken, "Tribes and Political Islam in the Borderland between Egypt and Libya: A (Trans-) Local Perspective," in *Tribes and Global Jihadism*, ed. Virginie Collombier and Olivier Roy (Oxford University Press, 2018), 0, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190864545.003.0004>.

113 Interviews in 2021 and 2023.

114 Interviews with members of the Warfalla tribe in 2023.

115 Aaron Zelin, "The Islamic State's Burgeoning Capital in Sirte, Libya" (Washington Institute, 2015), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-states-burgeoning-capital-sirte-libya>.

IS-Libya’s closeness to IS core rings true in its expansion in Libya generally, and in the takeover of Sirte specifically – as IS deployed similar tactics in Libya as in Syria. For example, Zelin describes that in some IS-held environments in Syria, a truck would drive around broadcasting information about its religion and ideology. IS would also establish religious schools for children, in which simple kids’ entertainment ran go alongside Qu’ran lessons.¹¹⁶ Local residents confirmed that IS-Libya copied these efforts in Derna and had also implemented them in Sirte. A local woman in Sirte explained how she did initially not like the “loud trucks”, but she continued listening to the local radio after IS-Libya took over and also sent her child (a girl) to afternoon sessions organized by IS-Libya at the local university.¹¹⁷

When contemplating these early days of IS-Libya in Sirte, a different woman interviewed touched upon three harbingers to IS-Libya’s rule in Sirte: the sentiment that IS-Libya did not seem to hate her like the Misratans did (the lesser of two evil and/or repentance recruitment driver), the fact that she was part of conversations between (male) relatives who deliberated joining IS-Libya as they were struggling to enforce their jurisdiction, and the notion that she had considered IS-Libya and ASL “basically the same (...) but with some more foreigners [IS-Libya]” (which was different from the way IS-Libya was perceived in Derna where local Jihadi groups like ASL and DMSC were more heavily locally rooted).

The next section will outline how IS-Libya took over local jihadi structures, employed foreign IS-Libya leaders and co-opted local law enforcement in order to successfully, violently rule in Sirte for almost two years (early 2015 – December 2016).

TAKING OVER EXISTING JIHADI STRUCTURES, FOREIGN LEADERSHIP AND LOCAL COOPERATION

IS-Libya’s biggest local competitor was Ansar al-Sharia.¹¹⁸ After its members started fearing the encroachment of Operation Dignity forces, some benefits of IS-Libya started increasing in importance, such as the clear support from the powerful IS core. Following pledges of allegiance (baya) to Baghdadi from Ansar al-Sharia paired with an influx of IS foreign fighters, local and foreign jihadis started to fill IS-Libya’s ranks.¹¹⁹ By late 2015, having crushed an uprising by the Firjan tribe and having expanded into nearby towns, the group’s control of Sirte was complete.¹²⁰

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The policies and practices of religious education in Sirte followed guidance from IS core. Crucial for these attempts was the Diwan al-Dawa wa-l-Masajid (The Dawa/Call and Mosques Administration). Following the defeat of IS-Libya in late 2016, some of its instructions were recovered in Sirte. Featured in al-Tamimi’s archives is an al-Dawa wa-l-Masajid document

116 Aaron Zelin, “My Beloved Brothers in God, This Is An Invitation: The Islamic State’s Dawa and Mosques Administration,” ISIS Files (George Washington University, December 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4079/poe.12.2020.01>.

117 Interview with Sirte resident in 2021.

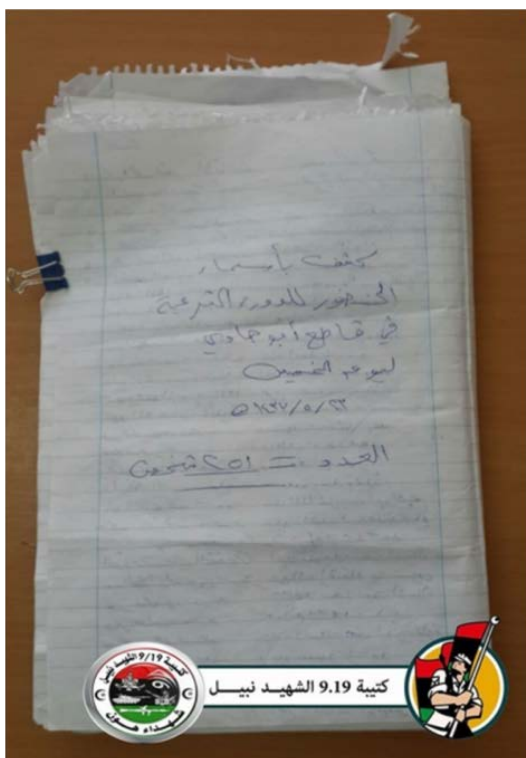
118 Ansar al-Sharia in Libya is a Salafi jihadi group that formed in the aftermath of the 2011 Libyan revolution. It has connections to al-Qa’ida and was mostly active in Benghazi and Derna, however, an allegedly independent group also formed in Sirte; Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, “Ansar al-Sharia (Libya)”, https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/ansar-al-sharia-libya#text_block_18854.

119 Prominent ISIS cleric Turki al Binali, for example, spoke in Sirte to build support for the group in February 2015, <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/north-africa/libya/2015/02/22/ةبيالللالتارسيفرهظيشعادللنييحووللاءبالزربا.html>; Charles Lister, “Competition Among Violent Extremists: Combating an Unprecedented Threat,” ANNALS AAPSS 668, November 2016.

120 Frederic Wehrey and Emad Badi, “A Place of Distinctive Despair” (Carnegie Middle East Center – Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 8, 2018), <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/76997>.

from IS Center in which the following responsibilities are described: First, establishing daily instructions in the mosques; second, starting compulsory sessions for the people of the Qasr Abu Hadi area (Qaddafi’s alleged birthplace south of Sirte and a steadfast bastion of support);¹²¹ third, tracking the imams and preachers; and fourth, writing daily reports.¹²² In these four instructions, IS combined both top-down governance, such as asking for daily reports from its affiliates, with local understandings, such as IS-Libya putting emphasis on Abu Hadi, likely an area which IS-Libya found both particularly promising for IS-Libya support (since villagers there despised the post-2011 Libyan establishment) but simultaneously in need of rigorous religious education by IS-Libya to override Qaddafi’s ideology (or it could simply be coincidence that documentation for Abu Hadi has been found but not for other parts/outskirts of Sirte). In line with its bookkeeping, IS-Libya kept records of attendance in Abu Hadi’s religious lessons as another uncovered document confirms. It states that 251 people attended the session, which can be considered substantial given that the total population of Abu Hadi was only a few thousand (likely no more than 4,000) and men, women and children are unlikely to have been in the same lessons.¹²³

Specimen 26S: Attendance of Shari’i sessions, Abu Hadi, Libya



Before those formalized instructions, however, IS-Libya had started “training sessions” for preachers and was encroaching on mosques and prayer rooms in other ways, such as putting up flyers in Sirte reminding people of prayer times and advertising free religious lessons.¹²⁴

121 The Economist, “Where Green Refuses to Fade,” The Economist, June 19, 2013, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2013/06/29/where-green-refuses-to-fade>.

122 <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/09/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-2>.

123 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/09/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-2>.

124 Interviews with residents of Sirte in 2022.

One example of how these flyers looked like was recovered from Derna:¹²⁵

Specimen 8P: Lesson Invitation, Derna, Libya



As Zelin concludes for Syria that “all of these activities were in the service of preparing the ground for IS’s eventual Caliphate announcement”,¹²⁶ this was likely also the case in Libya. In other words, similar rationales might have been driving these actions of IS-Libya – copying early efforts of establishing themselves from Syria in Libya before announcing Libya’s official IS provinces.¹²⁷ At the same time, the reasons for these early efforts to be fruitful were heavily locally tainted. Interviewees mentioned several points that can be summarized followingly: Libyans are largely very conservative, and religion plays an important role culturally but also politically. However, under Qaddafi interpretations of Islam were top-down and Qaddafi saw his own interpretations as the most valid. Therefore, there was widespread confusion after 2011 around the right interpretation of Islam – especially as it pertains to politics – coupled with a sentiment/desire to get/do it right. Interviewees from Derna, Sebha, Sirte, and Tripoli all mentioned this. These dynamics provided fruitful ground for IS-Libya’s early efforts described above. Not only IS-Libya but also other groups benefited from these dynamics, such as ASL as well as Salafi Madkhali groups (mainly in Sirte and Tripoli). In Sirte, Salafi Madkhali had become entrenched in some parts of the city and formed a palpable challenge to IS-Libya’s goal of governance. For example, a crucial final step of IS-Libya’s takeover in Sirte – the defeat of an uprising by the Firjan tribe – had Salafi Madkhali foundations. Madkhalis were amongst the quietist Salafis that Qaddafi had allowed in Libya (under supervision) – and in Sirte Madkhali thought was present in several mosques and Quran memorization centers. Khalid bin Rajab al-Firjani was a prominent local preacher with Madkhali affiliation and had strong aversion to IS-Libya. The group killed him and violently suppressed protests by his tribe and other followers in August 2015.¹²⁸ Madkhali thought, however continued under IS-Libya’s rule (and until today in Libya) and the group handed out punishments that included specific education

¹²⁵ <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/01/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents>.

¹²⁶ Zelin, “My Beloved Brothers in God, This Is An Invitation.”

¹²⁷ Aaron Y Zelin, “The Islamic State’s Territorial Methodology” (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 2016).

¹²⁸ Several of those who fled Sirte, including Ferjani’s brother, later formed the 604th Infantry Battalion with the support of fellow Madkhalis in other groups, including Radaa in Tripoli. The 604th Battalion joined the Misrata-led alliance known as al-Bunyan al-Marsous formed to drive ISIS from Sirte, but its distinctly ideological character drew Madkhali fighters from across western Libya. Many within the al-Bunyan al-Marsous coalition were wary of the 604th Battalion for the same reason. The 604th Battalion remains an important player in Sirte today, where it is presenting itself – like Radaa in Tripoli – as a policing force and has also opened new mosques and religious schools.

on Madkhali thought (and its wrongfulness).¹²⁹ For an example see the following court order from IS-Libya’s H isba center in Sirte.¹³⁰

Islamic State, Hisba centre, Wilayat Tarabulus, Sirte city

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

The state of prisoners for Sunday 1 Sha’aban 1437 AH corresponding to 8 May 2016 CE

18	Court 27/7	Shari’i session to know the difference between the Ahl al- Sunna and the Madkhalis, then his repentance will be sought and he will be released
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By the time IS-Libya established governance in Sirte, its Caliphate was announced and a formalized Diwan al-Dawa wa-l-Masajid established. The establishment of the Caliphate was a driver for increased formalization at its center and in (potential) provinces. In Libya, therefore, religious education was not merely driven by outreach, flyers and some lessons, but also by training locals to become better IS-Libya adherents and potentially even leaders. Zelin references a recovered exam from a “Qualifying Session for Imams and Preachers” in December 2015 – exemplifying how IS established religious structures under its guidelines through the Diwan al-Dawa wa-l-Masajid.¹³¹ This further corroborates the closeness of IS-Libya to the IS core.

IS-Libya also took over mosques and monitored prayer rooms – just as mentioned in the previous guidance “tracking imams and preachers” and violently enforced even in preacher assassinations over the course of its rule. Prominently in Sirte, the group repurposed the local institution of the Ouagadougou Conference Center, used under Qaddafi to host international summits, and transformed it into their base, in which they held sessions of Islamic education and sharia jurisprudence.¹³² The university, protocol palaces as well as the Ouagadougou Conference Center were previously public institutions connected to the Libyan public authorities. Following IS’s approach to confiscating buildings that are considered property of the apostate (Libyan) government¹³³ existing IS policies were also applied in Libya in this case – again exemplifying alliance with IS general policies.

129 “Addressing the Rise of Libya’s Madkhali-Salafis | Crisis Group,” April 25, 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/addressing-rise-libyas-madkhali-salafis>.

130 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/09/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-2>.

131 Document quoted on Zelin’s report “Beloved Brothers: ‘Qualifying Session for Imams and Preachers,’ Wilayat Tarabulus Media Office, December 8, 2015.”

132 IS propaganda video, “This is what God and His Messenger had promised us,” July 2016.

133 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The Islamic State’s Pillage Economy: The Policy of Confiscations” (Center for Justice & Accountability, August 2023).

The Ouagadougou Conference Center and its forecourt/square became infamous over the next months – as a main theater as well for IS-Libya’s “justice.” Concurrent with the familiar pattern of establishing jihadi governance, IS-Libya in Sirte as well first focused on religious education and preaching and subsequently moved into security provision and judicial matters.¹³⁴

SECURITY, ORDER AND LAW

Sirte experienced violence and retribution after the killing of Qaddafi in October 2011. After revolutionary forces left the city, security responsibilities were largely taken over by a jihadi-leaning militia coalition, the Sirte Security Committee (SSC) which morphed into Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte.¹³⁵ Co-opting or replacing these structures was central to IS-Libya’s vision for Sirte – building this vision on (at least some) local support and respect. Further, IS’s security provision and establishing courts and the enforcement of court orders were filling a void due to the collapse of courts and, even more impactfully, highlighted the weakness of tribal elders to offer protection and engage in conflict mediation after the collapse of the Qaddafi regime. H IS envisioned to govern Libya from the start, meaning IS were interested in (over)portraying their presence and having people know it was IS, for example, that was responsible for keeping crime levels low.

The personnel who became active in enforcing IS-Libya’s version of law and order in Sirte was a mix of three groups of actors. First, local jihadis who had shifted from Ansar al-Sharia to IS-Libya. Second, local stakeholders (like tribes linked to the former regime) who saw in IS-Libya either a bulwark against further retaliation, or at least a temporary option that allowed them to regain (some) influence. Third, foreign fighters who were either already IS fighters sent from Iraq and Syria or fighters who came to Libya to join IS-Libya, many of them from Libya’s neighboring countries.¹³⁶

IS-Libya’s H isba force in Sirte was a stronger, more radical version of the already – existing Ansar al-Sharia H isba force (before that there had been a lack of police force which many residents remembered vividly).¹³⁷ IS-Libya relied on previous members in security forces to show repentance and followingly pledge allegiance to the Caliph. After this process, existing members of the security forces were integrated into IS-Libya’s structures.¹³⁸ The leadership, however, was mostly foreign – the head of the local H isba police was an Egyptian referred to as Abu Abdu Misri.¹³⁹ IS-Libya had a track record of employing foreigners, especially foreign fighters who had already proven themselves in Iraq or Syria in leadership positions. One prominent example was Abu Nabil al-Anbari who was dispatched to Libya to help with military capacity building locally.¹⁴⁰

In the early phase of governance in Sirte (spring 2015) the terrorist group started promoting its security apparatus, and how it suppressed criminal activity and defied other threats to

134 Mara Revkin and Andrew March, “Caliphate of Law,” Foreign Affairs (blog), April 15, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2015-04-15/caliphate-law>.

135 Wehrey and Badi, “A Place of Distinctive Despair.”

136 Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Others: Foreign Fighters in Libya” (The Washington Institute, January 16, 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/others-foreign-fighters-libya>.

137 Author interview via Skype with two students in Sirte who lived in Sirte, August 2019.

138 Author interview via Skype with Abdu Almean, previously imam in the city of Sirte, September 2019.

139 Author interview via Skype with local council woman who lived in Sirte, September 2019.

140 <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/01/eulogy-to-abu-nabil-al-anbari-islamic-state>

inhabitants. The portrayal of a functioning and reliable police force remained a focal point of IS-Libya's rule in Sirte. In December 2015, for example, IS-Libya released a video from its Tarabulus province that captured part of its Hisba force in Sirte and their daily activities.¹⁴¹ In this, residents of the city praised IS-Libya for enforcing sharia and keeping the city safe. In February 2016, IS-Libya released a video¹⁴² showing cars with al-Hisba sprayed on them, featuring a long interview with a member from Sirte, who is part of Hisba, explaining why he wants to live by and enforce sharia. In addition, the video showed that IS-Libya controlled all part of public and private life, visiting stores and butchers checking if everything is halal, and confiscating and burning what is haram (mostly books). The deep penetration of the social sphere by IS-Libya was also expressed by several interviewees who lived under IS-Libya, explaining that even if they left former personnel in place, IS-Libya fighters kept checking in to ensure the teachers enforced gender segregation in school where these enforcers were often referred to as being foreigners.¹⁴³ When examining the Hisba in the Caliphate, other researchers such as Almohammad and Holzgruber, argue that IS's Hisba contains thought policing, body policing, spiritual policing, and market policing with a main aim being uniformity across the Caliphate – and crucially the authors derive these arguments from primary material that includes Libya.¹⁴⁴

The court system implemented by IS-Libya in Sirte was divided into courts for public matters¹⁴⁵ and personal matters.¹⁴⁶ The appointment of judges was handled in a top-down manner in the sense that Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi named or directly sent local leaders to Libya¹⁴⁷ who were in charge of appointing new judges and who decided on which judges to keep. Reportedly in Sirte, many of the existing judges stayed in place.¹⁴⁸

This was due to three dynamics: firstly, IS-Libya made it relatively easy for people to opt into their group while at the same time enacting harsh punishments for people who revolted against them.¹⁴⁹ The successful co-optation of Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte was crucial, for example, the defection of a senior Ansar al-Sharia Libya jurist, Sheikh Abu Abdullah al-Libi, to IS-Libya in March 2015. This not only sent a strong signal to other Ansar al-Sharia members, but also brought an experienced Sharia judge into the group. Secondly, the forces embedded in the existing justice system were overwhelmingly tied to the previous regime, which had an interest in cooperating with IS-Libya. One particularly successful example took place in February 2015 when forty-two individuals from the Ministry of Interior repented and pledged allegiance to Baghdadi.¹⁵⁰

141 IS propaganda video, "Islamic Police Sirt", December 2015.

142 IS propaganda video, "Preserving the Borders of God", February 2016.

143 Letta Tayler, "We Feel We Are Cursed," Human Rights Watch, May 18, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/05/18/we-feel-we-are-cursed/life-under-isis-sirte-libya>.

144 Clemens Holzgruber and Asaad Almohammad, "Moral Dominance: Policing Minds, Spirits, Bodies, and Markets," ISIS Files (George Washington University, June 2021), <https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/downloads/8910jt57v?locale=en>.

145 Concerned with matters related to the relationship between individuals and the Islamic State, such as accusations of spying, traitor, sorcerers.

146 Concerned with matters related to the relationship between individuals living in the Islamic State, such as hereditary matters, marriage and divorce issues.

147 Like Usama Karama, a relative of a former senior Qadhafi intelligence officer who became the local leader of Sirte or Ali Qarqa (also known as Abu Hamam al-Libi) who became the local leader in February 2015, when ISIS took over al-Nawfaliyah), Saber Ayyub, "Confessions of arrested IS members," Libya Herald, February 25, 2016, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2016/02/25/confessions-of-arrested-is-members/>, Zelin "Territorial Methodology".

148 Interview with Fawzi Mohammed Bashir Al-Ayat, Al Alan TV.

149 Tayler, "We Feel We Are Cursed."

150 Zelin, "The Islamic State's Territorial Methodology."

Finally, IS-Libya also recruited new personnel, aided by IS members publicly calling on individuals in Libya and abroad to join the group. Abu Hamza al-Misri appealed to legal scholars in particular to join the group and implement sharia.¹⁵¹ This dynamic of having established judges with local connections stay in place benefited IS-Libya when they were rolling out their system of governance in Sirte as it provided them with efficiency and legitimacy in the eyes of the local population due to many of the judge's heritages.

Still, the support of IS-Libya cannot be simplified across tribal lines or comprehensive jihadi conversion. One document from Benghazi exemplifies these complexities well. It is a recruitment form for (future) IS-Libya fighters concerning a man calling himself Abu Musab who claimed to have been part of Ansar Al Sharia who was motivated to join IS-Libya because of an influential Ansar Al Sharia sheikh in Tunisia. It seems unclear from the form where this young man was part of Ansar Al Sharia (Tunisia, Benghazi or other parts of Libya?). However, he also claims to be part of the Firjan tribe whose members were amongst the staunchest challengers of IS-Libya in Sirte (while others rose to prominence in the LNA's ranks).

Evidence of Ansar Al Sharia defections:¹⁵²

Specimen 38W: Form for soldiers' information, Libya

الدولة الإسلامية
استمارة بيانات الجند

الاسم: [] الكنية: []
 تاريخ الميلاد: [] مكان الميلاد: []
 الجنسية: [] الديانة: []
 التعليم: [] الخبرة العسكرية: []
 القبيلة: []
 العمل الحالي: [] تاريخ الانضمام للدولة الإسلامية: []
 الحالة الاجتماعية: [] عدد الأطفال: []
 مكان السكن: []

With the burgeoning justice system in place, IS-Libya started to not only control social mores through hisba, but also began punishing people with executions if they acted against IS-Libya's interpretation of sharia.¹⁵³ With these two court systems and the H isba together, IS-Libya managed to lay the groundwork for governing a formerly only rudimentarily governed and

¹⁵¹ Zelin, "The Islamic State's Burgeoning Capital in Sirte, Libya."

¹⁵² <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/09/archive-of-islamic-state-administrative-documents-2>

¹⁵³ Many of these examples are well documented either by IS propaganda or by human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch (HRW): For example, in December 2015 IS publicly executed "sorcerers", well-documented in the ISIS propaganda video "The magician will not succeed", or the case of Amjad bin Sasi, who was executed for crimes against God (hadd) that HRW has documented in detail.

partly neglected/attacked territory since they took care of private and public matters.¹⁵⁴ Citizens and IDPs who fled IS-Libya's rule in Sirte emphasized the harshness of the system but also said it was not arbitrary and did not seem to be driven by favoritism and that crime was basically non-existent during IS-Libya's rule.¹⁵⁵ Ultimately, however, IS-Libya's justice system was described as "not Libyan" because it was too harsh. Nevertheless, for some time any popular backlash against their rule was outweighed by the continuing civil war in Libya.¹⁵⁶ Given the situation in Sirte, IS-Libya's form of basic justice provided minimal value to the local population. For a limited time, this was able to generate some legitimacy for IS-Libya's rule.¹⁵⁷

With IS-Libya becoming IS's third strongest province, the local jihadis could comfortably rely on their accumulated strength in 2015. At the same time, dynamics that IS-Libya managed to exploit (chaos from the civil war, regional tribal competitions, local grievances and desire for establishing order, abundance of weapons across Libya) continued to persist. IS-Libya needed to keep their governance heavy-handed in order to denigrate (potential) competitors. Another way of fending off challenges was to adapt IS-Libya (further) to local circumstances, which occasionally required some innovation.

Potentials for innovation and Libyan idiosyncracies

In this part of Libyan IS idiosyncrasies and potentials for innovation, three aspects come under scrutiny: The infamous execution of Christians on the shores and deserts of Libya; the incorporation of sub-Saharan Africans into leadership positions; and the first confirmed female fighters for IS. Regarding the latter, women had not been confirmed as being involved as combatants with IS until February 2016 when several women (likely Tunisians) were taken into custody and three killed in Sabratha – a city close to Tunisia and part of IS-Libya's Tripoli province.¹⁵⁸

Eggert calls the first recorded use of women as IS combatants in Libya "telling" as a sign that IS was fielding a novel–and contested–tactic in its periphery (Libya). Further, she speculates that IS-Libya might have needed female fighters (versus a lack of that need in Iraq and Syria): "The fact that women were involved in at least one complex operation in Libya might be an indicator for the group trying out this new tactic in Libya where not only the security context is more challenging, but where IS is also struggling more to keep the local population under control."¹⁵⁹ While these assertions are theorizations for the most part, the fact that IS-Libya relied on several female combatants for operations in Libya–without a corroborating, relevant change in its ideology–certainly supports the rationale of more maneuvering space of IS-Libya for its practices in Libya/the periphery.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁴ Author interview via Skype with local council woman who lived in Sirte, September 2019; Author interview via Skype with two students in Sirte who lived in Sirte, August 2019.

¹⁵⁵ Still, HRW reports the 49 executions by IS in Sirte city and outlying areas followed largely secret proceedings that negate the most basic fair-trial standards.

¹⁵⁶ Charles Lister, "Competition among Violent Islamist Extremists: Combating an Unprecedented Threat," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 668, no. 1 (November 1, 2016): 53–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716216668500>.

¹⁵⁷ Author interview via Skype with Abdu Almean, previously imam in the city of Sirte, September 2019.

¹⁵⁸ Bel Trew, "Isis Sends Women into Battle in Libya," *The Times*, February 29, 2016, <https://www.thetimes.com/article/isis-sends-women-into-battle-in-libya-rjmhqc7k7>.

¹⁵⁹ Jennifer Philippa Eggert, "Women Fighters in the 'Islamic State' and Al-Qaida in Iraq: A Comparative Analysis," *Die Friedens-Warte* 90, no. 3/4 (2015): 366.

¹⁶⁰ This rationale is also in line with similar developments of jihadi groups before – for example, Al Shabab has enjoyed significant room for maneuver – as a very remote al-Qa'ida affiliate, Bacon, Tricia, and Daisy Muibu, 'Al-Qaida and Al-Shabaab: A Resilient Alliance', in Michael Keating, and Matt Waldman (eds), *War and Peace in Somalia: National Grievances, Local Conflict and Al-Shabaab*, Oxford UP, 2019.

Execution of Christians

Three main population groups that IS was dealing with in Iraq and Syria (Shia, Yazidis and Christians) are of very little relevance in Libya in terms of establishing support for governance locally. Almost all Libyans define as Sunni. Yazidis have reportedly only come to Libya when it was part of their refugee route to Europe¹⁶¹ and the percentage of Christians in Libya is approximately 0.5%.¹⁶² The widely propagated, brutal execution of 21 Christians by IS-Libya in 2015 is therefore noteworthy on three accounts. First, due to the deliberate targeting of some of the very few Christians in Libya. Second, due to IS's ideology towards Christians in the Caliphate, which captures some possibilities of second-order co-existence.¹⁶³ Third, the imminent retort this would (and did) trigger from Egypt and Italy. The second point, however, is less noteworthy when factoring in the development stage of IS-Libya (which ranges from migration to group formation to destabilization to consolidation to statehood).¹⁶⁴

In early February 2015 (when IS-Libya had established itself in Sirte), IS-Libya media operatives publicised the execution of 21 allegedly Coptic Christians from Egypt by IS-Libya fighters on a beach in IS-Libya's Tripoli province (of which Sirte is part).¹⁶⁵ The February 2015 edition of *Dabiq* also implied that the men had been killed. The Egyptians were foreign workers in the country and were all wearing orange jump suits for their execution.¹⁶⁶ The men were captured in two assaults in December 2014 and January 2015 in the Sirte Basin.¹⁶⁷

The embedding of IS-Libya's status within Islamic State's conceptualization of development stages offers clues as to why these Christians did not get the privilege of relatively humane treatment under IS-Libya – as converts or *ḍimmis*¹⁶⁸ – namely because this status is only awarded in later stages of development. However, IS-Libya propaganda released around this incident offers additional insights. First, IS-Libya fighters speak in English in the video indicating that this execution was designed to send shock waves abroad (including in Christian – majority countries like Italy/Europe). Second, the IS-Libya fighters formulate explicit threats to Egypt and Italy, indicating that IS-Libya wishes to scare off (further) involvement by Egypt on the side of the LNA. Italy, Libya's previous colonial power, had been meddling in Libya since 2011 and more recently, the Italian government had become outspoken for the need of international interventions in Libya. IS-Libya had potentially identified these two foreign powers as threats to their local expansion. The capture and then widely advertised execution of Egyptian Christians was an opportunity to display brutality and instill fear of IS-Libya in local but also regional and international forces. Third, IS-Libya used this execution as another chance to denigrate al-Qa'ida as weak and not stringent in its Salafi-jihadi ideology and practice.

161 Nick McAlpin, "Yazidi 'tortured' after Libya Militia 'Abducts' 110 Migrants," <https://www.newarab.com/?amp=1>, September 29, 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/news/yazidi-tortured-after-libya-militia-abducts-110-migrants?amp=1>.

162 "Libya," United States Department of State (blog), accessed June 9, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/libya/>.

163 Al-Tamimi, "The Islamic State's Pillage Economy: The Policy of Confiscations."

164 For more on the different stages of IS development and related governance see for example: Whiteside et al, "Non-state campaigning: Islamic State's guerrilla warfare doctrine," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, July 2024, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09592318.2024.2369958> or Ingram et al, "The Routinization of the Islamic State's Global Enterprise," Hudson Institute, April 2021, <https://www.hudson.org/node/43763>.

165 It was published by Al Hayat IS's multilingual media wing mainly targeting non-Arabic audiences.

166 Libya used to have large foreign worker contingents often working in Libya's oil and construction industries.

167 Al Jazeera, "ISIL Video Shows Christian Egyptians Beheaded in Libya | ISIL/ISIS News," Al Jazeera, February 16, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/2/16/isil-video-shows-christian-egyptians-beheaded-in-libya>.

168 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Islamic State and Its Treatment of 'Out-Groups': A Comparative Analysis" (Center for Justice & Accountability, August 2023), https://cja.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Al-Tamimi_theislamicstateandoutgroups.pdf.

Overall, the video picks up framing familiar to IS propaganda watchers – the victims are ritualistically walked down the beach and then made to kneel down with IS-Libya fighters lining up behind them. Then an English-speaking fighter explains that the group is sending a message from “the south of Rome” – which has been understood as threatening Italy by inferring the geographical closeness of the Libyan beaches to the European country. Later on in the video the threat is more implicit as the IS fighter asserts “We will conquer Rome.” The IS-Libya fighter goes on to say that IS will continue to fight the “Crusaders” and draws a line between (perceived) Christian alliances across the world: “Especially when you’re fighting us all together, therefore, we will fight you all together.” A scrolling caption in the video referred to the hostages as “People of the cross, followers of the hostile Egyptian Church.” The fighter also says that the beheadings are revenge for “Muslim women persecuted by Coptic crusaders in Egypt.”¹⁶⁹ In *Dabiq*, IS-Libya further relates this killing to previous IS actions – namely a suicide attack on a church in Baghdad in late 2010 which IS in Iraq claimed was revenge for maltreatment of Egyptian women.¹⁷⁰ In the video, IS-Libya explicitly ties this back to “revenge for Camelia and her sisters.”¹⁷¹ Finally, IS regularly accuses al-Qa’ida of being weak – on the Shiites in Iraq or elsewhere (like Yemen) as well as on other populations identified as “outgroups” by IS. With regard to Christians in particular, this killing can be seen as an assertion that al-Qa’ida is weak in its jihad while IS is stringent and strongly opposes Egypt’s Christians and is fearless in taking on any perceived threat/outgroup.¹⁷²

Dabiq February 2015



It is possible that IS-Libya was also aware that there were few people who would feel immediately threatened locally. In other words, given the negligible number of Christians in

169 Al Jazeera, “ISIL Video Shows Christian Egyptians Beheaded in Libya | ISIL/ISIS News.”

170 Thomas Joscelyn, “21 Egyptian Christians Executed in Islamic State Video | FDD’s Long War Journal,” February 15, 2015, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/02/21_egyptian_christia.php.

171 Camelia Shehata is an Egyptian Coptic woman and schoolteacher who is believed to have converted to Islam to escape an unhappy marriage to a Coptic priest, Tadros Samaan. After her disappearance in 2010, Camelia was arrested by Egyptian police and returned to Church. Muslim fundamentalists believe that the Church held a Muslim woman as hostage. They avenged Camelia’s captivity by beheading Coptic Christian hostages, as the video message said (<https://www.ramanmedianetwork.com/isis-vid-eo-shows-mass-beheading-of-christian-hostages/#sthash.dRBC2ygW.dpuf>).

172 Joscelyn, “21 Egyptian Christians Executed in Islamic State Video | FDD’s Long War Journal.”

Libya, people across Libya might find the video generally abhorrent but the potential local backlash was likely to be limited (versus in Iraq and Syria where the Christian communities were more substantial). Moreover, the victims were all foreigners.

What is certain is that shortly after the recording of the execution went public, the Egyptian Airforce struck several (alleged) IS-Libya locations in Libya – the first time Egyptian officials formally acknowledged military intervention in the country.¹⁷³ Italy also retaliated while the US increased their airstrikes against IS-Libya. In conversations with Western officials after 2017, this beheading was repeatedly mentioned as fuel for support for Bunyan al Marsous.¹⁷⁴

To further explain the discrepancies of the treatment of Christians under IS rule, al-Tamimi elaborates “it is not mandatory for the Islamic State to follow these paths when it captures Christians. Those taken prisoner can be offered benevolence or held for ransom only, and it would appear that the group generally decided on this latter option for any Christians it took captive in Iraq and Syria.”¹⁷⁵ In contrast to the executions in Libya, the Christian hostages taken in Syria in early 2015, who reportedly also refused calls for their conversion, were instead held for ransom – and later exchanged for money. IS-Libya’s video of the execution suggests that the Egyptian Christians may have had the option to convert as in the moments before the beheadings you can hear voices (allegedly of the IS-Libya fighters) yelling “Oh Lord Jesus” and the caption translates as “They call out to their idol and die on their idolatry.” It is impossible to know, however, if they were ever given that option. Independent of that, IS-Libya’s actions towards the few, foreign Christians in Libya was likely to have been directed outwards – signaling their strength and increasing their appeal for recruits (based on their uncompromising ideology and avenger for Camelia).

Al-Tamimi also touches upon another aspect that could have played a role in the savage treatment of the kidnapped Christians – IS-Libya’s state of lower development coupled with its closeness to sub-Saharan Africa. He claims: “The more brutal reality of the Islamic State’s approach towards Christians who are deemed as being “at war” is to be found in Africa, where the group routinely boasts of attacks and massacres it carries out against Christians, emphasizing the Christian identity of the victims of its attacks.” While he cites examples from 2023 and 2022, IS-Libya might have already been a precursor of this brutal treatment of Christians under IS on the African continent.¹⁷⁶

Just few months after the killing of 21 Egyptian Christians by IS-Libya’s Tripoli province, IS’s Furqan media arm released a video that appeared to show fighters from its Barqa and Fezzan province executing dozens of Ethiopian Christians on the coast and in the desert respectively.¹⁷⁷ Those killed were likely a mix of foreign workers and migrants on their passage to Europe.¹⁷⁸ Out of the 51 executed Christians, 31 were of had sub-Saharan origin.

173 Chris Stephen and Jared Malsin, “Egyptian Air Strikes in Libya Kill Dozens of Isis Militants,” *The Guardian*, February 17, 2015, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/16/egypt-air-strikes-target-isis-weapons-stockpiles-libya>.

174 Interviews with Western diplomats in 2021.

175 Al-Tamimi, “The Islamic State and Its Treatment of ‘Out-Groups’: A Comparative Analysis.”

176 Al-Tamimi.

177 This time only the ones at the beach are in orange jumpsuits.

178 McLaughlin, “ISIS Executes More Christians in Libya, Video Shows.”

The video is an interesting attempt by IS to strike a balance between its brutality and claimed fairness. Underlining their “fairness,” the narrator says that those who “perform prayer and pay alms” will have “their blood and property” protected, unless Islam dictates otherwise. Staged testimonials show people saying they are Christians allegedly living freely under IS e.g., in Aleppo and Raqqa – after paying their taxes.¹⁷⁹ However, for those who refuse to convert or pay taxes, the narrator promises death and destruction, such as for some Christians in Mosul whose churches were destroyed. The video then moves to alleged IS-Libya areas and the viewer can follow dark skinned people–likely African migrants–converting to Islam and then receiving hugs from IS-Libya fighters. However it is clear what awaits those who refuse to convert – the video cuts to the ritualistic passage of some Christians to their executions. For those who refuse Islam or jizya, the narrator says, “We owe nothing except the edge of the sword.”¹⁸⁰ Overall, also, these videos are further evidence that IS core was closely coordinating with IS-Libya fighters in all parts of Libya, underlining the closeness of IS-Libya during its heyday to IS in Iraq and Syria.

While trying to portray fairness in their conduct, the video actually highlights IS's divergences in practical treatment of Christians under their rule versus their (more noble) claims. With regard to Christians, al-Tamimi –focusing on Iraq and Syria– states that “*theoretically* (emphasis added), Christian communities can be afforded ‘toleration’ (...) [but] in truth [this is] tantamount in this day and age to mafia-type extortion. Outside this limited ‘tolerance,’ the group has engaged in crimes of unlawful killings, massacres and kidnappings against Christians, as well as confiscation of Christian property.”¹⁸¹ For Libya, the conclusion can be drawn that for the few Christians IS-Libya encountered during their heyday death was the likely outcome – with some being specifically hunted down like the Egyptian Christians.¹⁸²

179 David D. Kirkpatrick, “ISIS Video Appears to Show Executions of Ethiopian Christians in Libya,” The New York Times, April 19, 2015, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/20/world/middleeast/isis-video-purports-to-show-killing-of-ethiopian-christians.html>.

180 Elliott C. McLaughlin, “ISIS Executes More Christians in Libya, Video Shows,” CNN, April 19, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/04/19/africa/libya-isis-executions-ethiopian-christians/index.html>.

181 Al-Tamimi, “The Islamic State and Its Treatment of ‘Out-Groups’: A Comparative Analysis.”

182 So far, I have not come across evidence that Christians in Libya were allowed to convert.

Conclusion and Implications

IS-Libya is a noteworthy case study that shows how powerful provinces rose outside of IS’s core territory in Iraq and Syria. IS managed to exploit local, post-revolutionary and tribal cleavages to a similar extent as it exploited sectarian cleavages in Iraq, for example. Next to the group’s ability to adapt locally, however, IS-Libya benefited from strong support from IS core – financially, structurally and personnel-wise (several key leaders were sent to Libya). This rise in importance of the Libyan provinces, and Tarabulus specifically, in turn attracted large numbers of foreign fighters to Libya. They were eager to join the “Caliphate” – without needing to travel to Iraq and Syria.

The main arguments are that during its heyday IS-Libya was closely linked to IS core in terms of direct knowledge transplantation (in other words, ideological guidance but also personnel). At the same time, local dynamics pushed IS-Libya in practice to diverge from some Islamic State core guidance regularly – for example, due to tribal rivalries and its close geographical linkages to sub-Saharan Africa. These arguments explain also why IS-Libya was so affected by the decline of IS core.

This paper also discusses Libyan IS idiosyncrasies and potential for innovation – concentrating on two, key aspects: the infamous execution of Christian on the shores and deserts of Libya; and the first confirmed female fighters for IS. The paper argues that to a certain extent IS-Libya had more maneuvering space for its practices due to its geographical remoteness from IS core.¹⁸³

Driven by geographic rationales as well, sub-Saharan recruits played a comparatively more important role in Libya than they ever did for IS core. In 2024, this sub-Saharan proximity of Libya forefronts current and potential future threats with regard to IS globally. While the last attack IS-Libya claimed was in 2022,¹⁸⁴ local sleeper cells exist – according to Libyan security reports and claims of arrests as well as continued kidnapping for ransom instances. Depending on local, regional and international dynamics, a rise of IS in Libya is possible – likely driven from strength due to its South.

183 This rationale is also in line with similar developments of jihadi groups before – for example, Al Shabab has enjoyed significant room for maneuver – as a very remote al-Qa’ida affiliate, Bacon, Tricia, and Daisy Muibu, ‘Al-Qaida and Al-Shabaab: A Resilient Alliance’, in Michael Keating, and Matt Waldman (eds), *War and Peace in Somalia: National Grievances, Local Conflict and Al-Shabaab*, Oxford UP, 2019.

184 Libya Security Monitor, “ISIS SVBIED attack at LNA checkpoint at Umm al-Aranib,” 19 April 2022, <https://libyasecuritymonitor.com/isis-svbiied-attack-at-lna-checkpoint-at-umm-al-aranib/>



This report is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Department of State. The contents are the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of State or the United States Government.