

ISLAMIC STATE’S POWER PROJECTION BEYOND MESOPOTAMIA: “REMAINING AND EXPANDING” IN LIBYA

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The power struggle within the salafi-jihadist movement continues to stir the ‘jihadisphere’. Al-Baghdadi’s open challenge to the salafi-jihadi status quo peaked with his June 2014 claim to the Caliphate, which further gnawed the failing power of al-Qaeda that until recently was the dominant power in the salafi-jihadi sub-system. ISIS’ recent attempts towards ‘remaining and expanding’ beyond the Syria-Iraq front, as its strategic design dictates,¹ constitute a further escalation of the intra-jihadi power struggle that directly challenges al-Qaeda’s unipolar claim to jihadi branding and franchise. The flurry of declarations of support and bay’ah² (to al-Zawahiri or al-Baghdadi) has been dichotomizing the salafi-jihadi movement between loyal to al-Qaeda forces and the ‘defectors’ to the self-proclaimed Islamic State; thus, sealing the increasing bipolarity in the jihadi sub-system.

On the ground, this systemic reconfiguration takes a much more complex form as it unfolds over the ashes of the Arab Uprisings legacy. The local fronts, where this

¹ For the Islamic State’s conceptualization of the ‘remaining and expanding’ strategy see Remaining and Expanding. (2014). *Dabiq* (5), 20-32.

² For the difference between a simple declaration of support and the pledge of bay’ah see Milton, D., & al-`Ubaydi, M. (2015). Pledging Bay`a: A Benefit or Burden to the Islamic State? *CTC Sentinel*, 8(3), 1-7. and Porter, G. D. (2015). What to Make of the Bay`a in North Africa? . *CTC Sentinel*, 8(3), 14-17.

intra-jihadi power struggle unravels, remain inherently multipolar. The pockets of ungovernance that breed the jihadi presence, at the same time restrict its growth prospects by fragmentizing the conflict environment to a multitude of actors and potential threats. This is true for the Islamic State's bastion, Syria and Iraq, where IS has established territorial control, and more so in the other –less advanced- power vacuums in the wider region. From Caucasus to Af-Pak, down to southern Arabian Peninsula, Sinai, the Horn of Africa and across Sahel to West Africa, political vacuums have fostered the growth of jihadi groups, which, however, operate in highly fluid conflict environments.

Among these dispersed corners of instability, North Africa stands out as the most 'promising' ground for the replication of the Islamic State paradigm, as the jihadi forces there seem to have higher prospects to master and tame the conflict environment. Privileged with a secure zone of retreat (Sahel), the North African jihadi forces have managed to survive repetitive counter-terrorism campaigns since the 1990's. On the run or under constant pressure, after the defeat in the Algerian civil war, the jihadi forces have operated largely in the North Africa region's periphery. However, the brewing civil war in post-Gaddafi Libya has allowed them to extend their foothold in the heart of North Africa. With Libya as the main hub, the salafi-jihadi forces have managed to establish an instability belt radiating to Mali, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Sinai. The local forces have not been able yet to sustain long-term territorial control but this web of regional connections in conjunction with Libya's strategic location, civil war conditions and abundance of weapons, constitute Libya fertile for Islamic state-formation.

The following sections will evaluate the prospects of an Islamic State replication in Libya. The focus is mainly on the local level and regional connections are discussed only in relation to the events on (Libyan) ground. The first section will sketch the conflict map of the Libyan civil war. This will set the background for the next section that attempts to pinpoint the movements of the jihadi forces inside this map and to evaluate the prospects for the replication of the Syrian scenario in Libya. The article asserts that the prospects for an Islamic State in Libya depend, as in Syria, on the ability of the new generation of 'statist' salafi-jihadism to control the Islamist camp. This will offer a better understanding of the Libyan civil war's inner dynamics and the looming dangers of similar 'Islamic State' spawns across North Africa.

The conflict map of the Libyan civil war

The recent upsurge of Libyan violence has its roots in the General Khalifa Haftar's effort to forcibly resolve, in early 2014, the political gridlock. In February 2014, Haftar ordered the dissolution of the General National Congress and called for new elections in June. Haftar's –political- initiative, widely perceived as a coup attempt, was followed in May by an attempt to reclaim the military initiative. In preparation for the new elections, Haftar launched 'Operation Dignity', which targeted Islamist armed groups in Benghazi. Defeated in the June elections, which admittedly had a low turnout (18%), the Islamist political forces together with a diffuse array of oppositional groups formed a rival front, called 'Libya Dawn'. The consequent clashes divided Libya into two heterogeneous camps, stretching along fuzzy geographical, ideological and operational lines. The two camps superficially group tribal, crime-related and insurgent spheres of influence that have been crosscutting Libya's political and territorial landscape since 2011.³

Although there is no one dividing line that clearly dissects the two camps, one can discern some common features that can improve our understanding of Libya's conflict map. The forces operating under the 'Operation Dignity' umbrella, which largely control the eastern part of Libya (Cyrenaica), comprise of relatively secular and liberal forces, including technocrats and some remnants of the old regime. On the contrary, the 'Operation Dawn' grouping, which controls the western region of Tripolitania, mainly consists of Islamist/conservative forces and local tribal leaders and warlords.

Libya's non-Arab ethnic groups have also taken sides, in order to promote their separate agendas. The Berber (Amazigh) militias, which are strong in the northwestern tip of the country, have been collaborating with the Operation Dawn forces in their effort to dislodge pro-Dignity forces around Zintan. The Tuareg militias, operating in the south-west Tripolitania and west Fezzan, have also shown a pro-Dawn stance. Largely directing their military efforts locally, Tuareg militias have

³ For the development of events that led to the current crisis, see Gartenstein-Ross, D., & Barr, N. (2015). *Dignity and Dawn: Libya's Escalating Civil War*. The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism –The Hague (ICCT) .

taken advantage of the general disorder to reclaim and protect their traditional desert area against the planted, as Tuareg believe, Arab and Tubu tribes in the area. Therefore, this has pushed the Tubu militias to the Dignity camp. Equally determining was the –relative- geographical proximity of the Tubu strongholds in the desert of eastern Fezzan and southern Cyrenaica to Operation’s Dignity bastion in Cyrenaica.⁴

This web of internal actors and interests intertwines with the interests of external actors. A civil war usually attracts regional attention, and quite often external intervention on both sides of the conflict. Although external influence can range in intensity and commitment, no study of a civil war is complete without the regional component of the civil rift. In Libyan context, this brings Egypt, UAE, and to a lesser extent, Algeria on the side of Operation Dignity, while Qatar, Turkey and Sudan on the side of Operation Dawn. The backers of the Operation Dignity have been more active in their support. UAE and Egypt bombed Islamist positions, in August 2014, in order to prevent the Dawn forces to capture Tripoli. Egypt repeated its air strikes, in February 2015, after the gruesome beheading of Coptic Christians by Libyan jihadist forces, claiming affiliation to the Islamic State.

The ‘Islamic State’ in Libya

This amalgam of diverging interests and ‘marriages of interest’ -barely a scratch of the surface of the Libyan conflict map- lay the background for the entrenchment of jihadi forces. Since spring 2014, while the two camps are kept busy crossing their swords, jihadi groups have been establishing themselves on Libya’s Mediterranean coast, in areas like Derna, Benghazi and Sirte. The initial core comprised of militants from the al-Battar Brigade that returned from Syria. Grouping under the ‘Islamic Youth Shura Council’ and other smaller formations, this new generation of ‘Afghan’ (Syrian)-Arabs set out to export the Syrian experience back home. Although the territorial control the Libyan ‘Islamic State’ exercises in these areas is still far from complete (especially in Benghazi), the jihadist forces in Libya have been vocal about

⁴ For an analysis of the civil war from the perspective of Libya’s ethnic minorities, see Howard, G. (2014). Libya's South: The Forgotten Frontier. *CTC Sentinel*, 7(11), 12-15. “A fierce battle for control in Libya's desert” *Al-Jazeera*. (2014, Dec. 5). Retrieved from <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/12/fierce-battle-control-libya-desert-201412591647138535.html> and Howard, G., & Smith, H. (2014). Will Terrorism in Libya be solely Driven by Radical Islamism? *CTC Sentinel*, 7(2), 17-19.

their territorial ambitions. Upon their pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi, in October 2014, the Libyan jihadists announced the sub-division of Libya into three operational provinces: Fezzan, Tarabulus (Tripoli), and Barqa (Cyrenaica); thus, effectively claiming all of Libya.

For the moment, country-wide expansion is not in their plans. Drawing on the Syrian example, the Libyan jihadi forces aspire first to unite (voluntarily or forcibly) the jihadi camp, before confronting their arch ideological enemies (Operation Dignity and Western influence). This is readily evident in their recent strategic decisions. Operations in the western coastal zone (Derna, Benghazi), where the pro-Islamic State forces first appeared, are currently in a stalemate phase. Inside these areas, encircled by the Operation Dignity forces, they seem to pursue the consolidation and preservation of base areas and fragile ‘liberated zones’, rather than expansion. On the contrary, their focus has shifted to Tripoli, the stronghold of Libya Dawn.

In his acceptance of the pledged bay’ah, al-Baghdadi stressed that the ‘formalization of the relationship’ signaled “*the nullification of the groups therein* [in the lands of bay’ah]”.⁵ In this light, Libya’s Islamic State forces attempt to strengthen their ranks by demonstrating military prowess and conducting spectacular attacks. This type of show-off has paid off in Syria, where hundreds of Islamists deserted their groups to join ISIS. However, what significantly differentiates the two conflicts is the lack of the type of sectarianism (Sunni-Shia) that fuelled ISIS reputation. Libya’s religious homogeneity deprives the jihadi forces from targets that can easily provide them credentials of ruthlessness and ‘Islamic orthodoxy’. According to the new jihadi trends, attacks on Westerners and regional Arab targets, like those accessible to Libyan jihadis,⁶ count less as a recruitment magnet. In fact, the gruesome attacks on Egyptian and Ethiopian Christians⁷ have served exactly this purpose. However, this extra-Libyan sectarianism does not attract many supporters and fails to spiral out the intra-Libyan level of violence.

⁵ Remaining and Expanding. (2014). *Dabiq*(5), 24

⁶ Apart from the attacks on Libyan security forces, the Islamic State in Libya has claimed responsibility for several attacks against Arab embassies and diplomatic personnel (Egypt, Morocco, and UAE) and Westerners (e.g. January 2015 attack on Corinthia Hotel).

⁷ Islamic State in Libya captured and killed a group of Egyptian Copts in February and a group of Ethiopian Christians in April 2015.

It remains to be seen how the pro-Islamic State forces in Libya will address this challenge. In Syria, ISIS was fortunate enough to compete with a highly divided opposition, where Muslim Brotherhood held minimal presence and the more radical Islamist forces preserved antagonistic turfs, rather than unified command. In Libya, the intra-Islamist configuration is far more complex. Not only does the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood (Justice and Construction Party) hold significant power, but also the Libyan jihadi landscape hosts more seasoned and mature veterans.

North Africa, largely due to the Sahel sanctuary, has preserved a jihadi mosaic that extends back two generations of jihadi activism. Thus, the latest ‘Islamic State-friendly’ generation coexists and competes for dominance in the jihadi camp, together with the first generation of pre-al Qaeda jihadi forces, which did not shift to ‘transnational jihad’ after the defeat in the 1990’s local jihad struggles, and the second generation of al-Qaeda franchising, who joined jihad in the 2000’s. From former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) members who, ‘seduced by the false gods of democracy’, formed political parties⁸ to former al-Qaeda operatives and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) influenced groups, the Libyan micro-jihad sphere is multifunctional and highly complex. In Syria, the new jihadi generation managed to effectively sideline the older or the old-minded generations with relative ease. It is doubtful that Libya’s jihadi veterans will turn out to be an equally soft target.

Conclusion

Islamic State’s strategy of ‘remaining and expanding’ has brought Libya to the center of efforts to replicate the Islamic state model. In order to evaluate the prospects for such a development, this article has outlined the main aspects and actors of the Libyan civil war. This conflict analysis has shown that the road to Islamic State is paved with battles on two fronts. The first consists of the multiple internal and external forces involved in the Libyan civil war and the second one consists of the entrenched antagonistic jihadi forces. Hence, the rise of an ‘Islamic State’ in Libya depends, first, on the ability of these forces to maneuver through the Libyan civil war and entrench

⁸ Such as al-Watan party (led by Abdelhakim Belhadj) and al-Umma al-Wasat (led by Sami al-Saadi).

themselves territorially, while the two main blocks bleed each other out. Second, on their ability to win the generational battle inside the jihadi movement.