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Libya: Islamic State forced out of Derna

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Islamic State (IS) appears to have suffered a setback in Libya after they were pushed out from the city of Derna this month (al-Arabiya, April 21). The victory was claimed by both the Libyan military under General Khalifa Haftar and the local "Shura Council of the Mujahideen of Derna and its Outskirts," or SCMD, which released a two and a half minute-long video entitled "The joy of the people after liberation" via its al-Sabeel Media Foundation (North Africa Post, April 22). The film consists of aerial footage of the city, apparently filmed using a drone and overlaid with the sounds of congested traffic.

IS found a foothold in Derna in May 2014 with the return of members to the city of the Syria-based but Libyan-led al-Battar Brigade (Terrorism Monitor, April 1). These militants formed the Islamic Youth Shura Council, which mounted highly visible street patrols but never quite managed to take control of the city from their Islamist rivals. In fact, the groups behind the SCMD had already pushed IS forces out of central Derna into the city's eastern outskirts of Al Fatayih as early as last year.

Meanwhile, there is no love lost between the SCMD and Haftar, whose Operation Dignity fought Libya's Islamists for more than a year until a ceasefire in 2015 and his official appointment as head of the military. The SCMD, for its part, is an umbrella group of local Islamist militias that includes the Abu Slim Martyrs Brigade and was formed in opposition to Haftar in 2014 (Al Jazeera, December 13, 2014).

In the days following the IS retreat from Derna, the SCMD accused Haftar of ordering airstrikes on the town that killed at least three people (Libya Observer, April 23). Mohamed al-Mansuri, the SCMD's media spokesman, also accused Haftar and the military of cooperating with IS, calling the parties "two faces of the same coin" (Libya Herald, April 24).

IS fighters appear to have retreated towards Sirte about 370 miles away following their defeat in Derna. The military can be expected to pursue them, but clashes in Derna are likely to continue.

Additionally, with IS gone, the remaining al-Qaeda-linked groups will be dominant but General Haftar will be unwilling to let them regain free reign of the city.

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