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“We Feel We Are Cursed”

Life under ISIS in Sirte, Libya



“We Feel We Are Cursed”

Life under ISIS in Sirte, Libya

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Map



Summary

The final stage of the [2011] revolution was in Sirte. We were filled with hope. Then step by step, Daesh took over. Now we feel we are cursed.

-“Ali,” resident who fled ISIS in Sirte

In late 2014, members of the extremist armed group Islamic State, also known as ISIS, began filtering into Sirte, a Mediterranean port city on the northern coast of Libya. By August 2015, the group had turned Sirte into its largest stronghold outside of Iraq and Syria. This report documents serious crimes committed by ISIS in Sirte including the unlawful executions of at least 49 people by methods including decapitation and shooting.

ISIS has imposed its severe interpretation of Sharia (Islamic law) on all aspects of life in Sirte down to the length of men’s trousers, the breadth and color of women’s gowns, and the instruction students receive in state schools, a Human Rights Watch investigation found. Meanwhile, the group is failing to provide basic necessities to the local population. Instead it is diverting food, medicine, fuel, and cash, along with homes it confiscated from residents who fled, to as many as 1,800 fighters, police and functionaries it has amassed in the city.

The 49 executions by ISIS in Sirte city and outlying areas that Human Rights Watch documented followed largely secret proceedings that negate the most basic international fair-trial standards. Those killed include alleged “spies” and “sorcerers,” wounded or captive members of enemy forces, and a young man accused of blasphemy. ISIS also has kidnapped and disappeared dozens of Libyan militia fighters and many are presumed dead, exiled Sirte city councilmen and fighters from rival forces told Human Rights Watch.

This report is largely based on interviews with 45 Sirte residents who had either fled the city or come on errands to Misrata, a coastal city 240 kilometers (150 miles) to the west. Human Rights Watch interviewed most of the residents during a trip to Misrata in March 2016, and carried out additional interviews by telephone and internet. The Sirte residents described scenes of horror—public beheadings, corpses in orange jumpsuits hanging from scaffolding in what they referred to as “crucifixions,” and masked fighters snatching men

from their beds in the night. They said Hisba (morality) police aided by informants patrolled the streets threatening, fining or flogging men for smoking, listening to music, or failing to ensure their wives and sisters were covered head to toe in loose black *abayas*, and hauling boys and men into mosques for prayer and mandatory religious education. “Ahlam,” 30, who had come to Misrata for food and health care, began to cry as she said she and her family would have to return to Sirte in the coming days:

Life in Sirte is unbearable. Everyone is living in fear. They are killing innocent people. There are no groceries, the hospital has no doctors or nurses, there is no medicine. ...There are spies on every street. Most people have left but we are trapped. We don’t have enough money to leave.

ISIS also is looting and destroying homes of perceived enemies, several of those interviewed said. The group has even closed lingerie shops and Western clothing stores.

Classes at Sirte University have been suspended since late 2015, when teachers and students stopped attending after ISIS banned history and law instruction, and ordered separate shifts for male and female students. ISIS has patrolled primary and secondary schools and quizzed the students on Islamic law, former residents said.

ISIS has taken over Sirte’s port, air base, main power station and radio station, along with all local government offices and finances. It has set up at least three prisons, including one in a former kindergarten. The group allows communications with the outside world only through ISIS-run call centers, and has shut all banks but one, open only to its members.

More than two-thirds of Sirte’s 80,000 residents have fled since ISIS entered the city. There are no camps in Libya for people who fled Sirte. Residents who sought shelter in Misrata said they have received almost no emergency assistance. Officials in Misrata said they lacked the resources to care for the displaced residents. Most international aid organizations have pulled out of the country, wracked by armed conflict in 2011 and again since 2014, because of a lack of security.

The murder of civilians, or wounded or captive fighters by members of a party to an armed conflict is a war crime. So is carrying out executions or other criminal punishments without a sentence issued by a regular court after a trial that guaranteed all the basic fair trial rights of the accused. The nature and scale of ISIS's unlawful executions and other acts in Libya also may amount to crimes against humanity.

As the de-facto governing force in Sirte, ISIS's failure to ensure access to basic food and medical necessities for the local population, while providing it for their fighters, amounts to serious human rights abuses, including of the rights to food and health. Many of the groups' harsh rules are also serious human rights abuses of the rights to freedom of religion, movement and expression, among other rights.

The United States, the United Kingdom, Italy and France are reportedly preparing an air campaign against ISIS in Libya. In May rival Libyan armed forces began separate mobilizations for an advance on Sirte.

All parties to the Libya conflict must take all feasible measures to protect civilians from harm, in accordance with the international laws of war. Libyan authorities, to the extent that is currently possible, and countries able to exercise criminal jurisdiction should take immediate steps to apprehend and prosecute those responsible for atrocities by ISIS and other parties in Libya. Member countries of the International Criminal Court should increase resources to the court so it can pursue an investigation into ongoing serious crimes by all sides.

The United Nations Human Rights Council should prioritize appointing an independent expert or other mechanism to document serious, ongoing abuses by all parties in Libya, as well as the command structure of ISIS and other organizations responsible for serious crimes, with the aim of deterrence and accountability. The UN Security Council should impose sanctions on members of ISIS and others found responsible for serious crimes in Libya—including those who intentionally finance or otherwise assist the abuses--while ensuring appropriate due process.

International parties have repeatedly failed to act on their promises to identify and punish the perpetrators of ISIS atrocities in Sirte and other serious crimes in Libya. Continued failure to act will result in more horrific crimes and more civilian victims.

Recommendations

To All Parties to Conflicts in Libya, Including ISIS

- Take all feasible measures to protect civilians, in accordance with international humanitarian law, during any military ground and air campaigns.
- In areas such as Sirte where a party to the conflict serves as the de-facto governing force, take all feasible measures to protect without discrimination the rights of all its inhabitants and ensure their basic needs are met.

To the Libyan Authorities

- Take immediate steps to apprehend and prosecute those responsible for serious crimes by ISIS and other parties, to the extent that this is currently possible.
- Prioritize increasing humanitarian aid to people affected by conflicts in Libya, including those affected by ISIS control of Sirte.

To Foreign Governments

- Prioritize donations for humanitarian aid for people fleeing Sirte and others affected by the conflict in Libya.
- Where feasible, take immediate steps to investigate and prosecute serious crimes related to Libya—whether by ISIS or other parties—that violate international law, such as crimes against humanity, war crimes, and torture, using universal jurisdiction.
- Ensure the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court has sufficient resources to pursue an investigation into ongoing serious crimes by all sides in Libya.

To the United Nations

The Human Rights Council:

- Appoint a dedicated investigatory mechanism, such as an independent expert, to document and regularly report on serious, ongoing abuses by ISIS and all other parties in Libya, as well as the command structure of ISIS and other organizations responsible for serious crimes, with the aim of deterrence and accountability.

The Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team and the Libya Panel of Experts:

- Conduct research on members of ISIS and others responsible for human rights abuses and grave laws-of-war violations in Libya, and recommend that the Security Council impose sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes, against these individuals, while ensuring those targeted receive appropriate due process.

The Security Council:

- Impose sanctions on members of ISIS and others found responsible for serious crimes in Libya, including those who intentionally finance or otherwise assist the abuses, while ensuring appropriate due process.
- Direct the human rights unit of its Libya support mission to regularly produce public reports on the human rights situation in the country.

Methodology

This report is largely based on field research by two Human Rights Watch researchers in Misrata, Libya, from March 24 to 29, 2016, as well as additional interviews by Human Rights Watch via telephone or Internet. Human Rights Watch interviewed 45 former and current Sirte residents including relatives of individuals killed or detained by ISIS, a former prisoner of ISIS, exiled local officials, members of local armed groups that had fought ISIS, teachers, lawyers, and health-care workers, most in Misrata.

Human Rights Watch also interviewed Misrata city councilmen, security officials and aid workers; foreign-based Libya security analysts; members of international non-governmental organizations; and exiled Libyan human rights defenders, some in-person and others by phone or email. In addition, Human Rights Watch reviewed dozens of videos and photographs of ISIS acts in Sirte and cross-checked accounts from interviews with international and local media reports.

Human Rights Watch has changed the names of most people it interviewed, who feared ISIS would retaliate against them or family members still in Sirte. All aliases used in this report are first names that are in quotation marks on first reference. In many cases Human Rights Watch omitted additional details such as the specific dates of the interviews, to further protect those interviewed. Human Rights Watch Researchers conducted the interviews in English, using an Arabic-English interpreter, or in Arabic.

All participants verbally consented to the interviews after being informed of the purpose of the interview, its voluntary nature, and the ways in which the data would be collected and used. Human Rights Watch informed all those with whom we spoke that they could decline to answer questions or end the interview at any time. We did not offer or provide compensation, apart from travel fare, to anyone we interviewed.

Human Rights Watch did not attempt to visit Sirte because of security concerns. Many past and present Sirte residents declined interview requests out of fear.

I. ISIS in Libya

ISIS surfaced in Libya 2014, when Libyan extremist armed groups began pledging allegiance to the group.¹ Its rise coincided with a political vacuum created when two rival governments began vying for power, one based in western Tripoli and another in eastern Tobruk.² Fighting between Libyan armed groups supporting the two rival governments has left Libya's institutions in near-collapse.³ A third, UN-brokered "unity" government attempted to take office in March 2016 but at the time of writing was struggling to gain authority.⁴

ISIS held the eastern Libyan city of Derna from October 2014 until rival armed forces routed it the following July.⁵ In November 2014 fewer than 100 of the group's fighters filtered into Sirte, then largely controlled by Ansar al-Sharia, an Islamist fundamentalist group. By February 2015, ISIS had absorbed most local Ansar al-Sharia members. In May, ISIS captured Sirte's Al-Qardabiya air base from Libya Dawn, a coalition of western Libyan forces that includes Misrata's Brigade 166.⁶ By August, following a failed insurrection by local fighters, ISIS controlled all of Sirte.⁷

At this writing, ISIS controlled a nearly 200-kilometer (120-mile) wide swath of Libya's northern coast extending east and west from Sirte, including much of the Gulf of Sirte, and

¹ "Scores of Libyans pledge loyalty to ISIS chief in video," Al Arabiya, November 1, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/11/01/Libyans-pledge-allegiance-to-ISIS-chief-in-video.html>.

² See, e.g., Statement of Martin Kobler, special representative to the United Nations general secretary, to the UN Security Council, March 2, 2016, <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=5109&language=en-US>, and testimony of Frederic Wehrey, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, to US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, March 3, 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/03/03/path-forward-in-libya/iut5>.

³ Testimony of Claudia Gazzini, International Crisis Group, to US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, March 3, 2016, <http://www.foreign.senate.gov/download/gazzini-testimony-030316>.

⁴ "Regional powers to hold Libya talks in Vienna, Italian minister says," Reuters, May 9, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-idUSKCN0Y01YW>.

⁵ "Libya officials: Jihadis driving IS from eastern stronghold," Associated Press, July 30, 2015, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/d673b094a2b74057b8ca3ae27055af84/libya-officials-jihadis-driving-eastern-stronghold>.

⁶ "ISIS affiliated fighters have captured a key airport in Central Libya," *Independent*, May 29, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/isis-affiliated-fighters-have-captured-a-key-airport-in-central-libya-10285050.html>.

⁷ "ISIS Re-Establish Their Hold on Qaddafi's Home Town After Crushing a Rebellion," *Time*, August 19, 2015, <http://time.com/4003049/isis-sirte-rebellion/>.

had a presence in other parts of Libya including Benghazi to the east and Sabratha to the west.⁸

The United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, and France at time of writing were preparing for a possible military intervention against ISIS in Libya, provided the UN-backed “unity” government gained authority and gave them approval.⁹ The United States, United Kingdom and France reportedly have conducted surveillance flights in Libya and have special forces operating inside the country.¹⁰ In May rival Libyan armed forces aligned with the two governments in Tobruk and Tripoli began separate mobilizations for an advance on Sirte, despite appeals from the third, UN-backed government to await a unified military command.¹¹

ISIS also has carried out a number of deadly attacks elsewhere in Libya. These include an armed assault on the luxury Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli that killed nine people on January 27, 2015, a suicide truck bombing on a Libyan police training center that killed at least 47 people on January 7, 2016, and numerous attacks on oil facilities and checkpoints.¹²

A US military commander said in April that ISIS now has 4,000 to 6,000 fighters inside Libya.¹³ Some Libyan and international Libya security analysts, as well as a UK government

⁸ Human Rights Watch interviews with a Western diplomat, Tunis, March 30, 2016, and a Misrata military intelligence official, Misrata, March 27, 2016, as well as Libya security analysts, April-May 2016. See also Issandr El Amrani, “How Much of Libya Does the Islamic State Control?”, *Foreign Policy*, February 18, 2016, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/op-eds/how-much-of-libya-does-the-islamic-state-control.aspx>.

⁹ “Libya Announces Anti-ISIS Task Force,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 6, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-militants-threaten-misrata-libyas-commercial-capital-1462551993>.

¹⁰ Missy Ryan, “U.S. establishes Libyan outposts with eye toward offensive against Islamic State,” *Washington Post*, May 12, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-establishes-libyan-outposts-with-eye-toward-offensive-against-islamic-state/2016/05/12/11195d32-183c-11e6-9e16-2e5a123aac62_story.html. Eric Schmitt, “Pentagon Has Plan to Cripple ISIS in Libya With Air Barrage,” *New York Times*, March 8, 2016. Aidan Lewis, “Signs grow of new Western urgency to stop Islamic State in Libya,” February 25, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-west-idUSKCN0VX287>.

¹¹ “Rival Assaults on IS Stronghold Deepen Libya’s Chaos,” Associated Press, May 6, 2016, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/rival-assaults-stronghold-deepen-libyas-chaos-38932563>.

¹² See, e.g., “Libya Hotel Attack: five foreigners among nine killed,” BBC News, January 28, 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31001094, and “Islamic State Claims Police Center Bombing,” Reuters, January 8, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-i-islamic-state-idUSKBN0UM1Y120160108>, and numerous attacks on checkpoints and oil facilities.

¹³ Briefing by Gen. David M. Rodriguez, transcript, US Department of Defense, April 7, 2016, <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/715846/departments-of-defense-briefing-by-gen-david-m-rodriguez>.

official, estimated the number to be closer to 3,000.¹⁴ Inside Sirte, ISIS has up to 1,800 fighters, at least 70 percent of them foreign, a Libyan military intelligence official in Misrata told Human Rights Watch.

ISIS conscripts children as young as 16 as fighters, the Misrata intelligence official, two Misrata fighters from the Libya Dawn coalition, and an exiled Sirte city councilman said.¹⁵ The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights reported in February 2016 that ISIS affiliates had forcibly recruited children and in February 2016 celebrated the graduation in Sirte of 85 boys under the age of 16 whom the group trained in suicide bombing, booby trapping and weapons use. The report said ISIS referred to the group as the “Caliphate Cubs.”¹⁶

There was widespread agreement among those interviewed by Human Rights Watch that ISIS’s Sirte-based branch is directly linked to ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and is run by foreign security, financial, legal emissaries dispatched by the group’s central command.¹⁷ “The Libya outpost is not a franchise. It is a second store run by the parent company,” a Western diplomat working on Libya told Human Rights Watch.¹⁸

ISIS’s leaders in Sirte include Syrians, Saudis, Egyptians, and Sudanese, according to dozens of exiled residents, as well as Libyan and foreign security analysts. At least 15 Libyans play prominent roles in the group’s Sirte operations, with some serving as the face

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch interviews with Misrata military intelligence official, March 27, 2016, as well as with an international security analysts by telephone, April-May 2016. UK Foreign Secretary David Hammond in April 2016 estimated ISIS has about 3,000 members in Libya; see “UK may consider Libyan request for air or naval support, says Hammond,” *Guardian*, April 19, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/apr/19/uk-libya-air-naval-support-philip-hammond>. See also Ruth Sherlock, “US Drawing Up Plans for Libya Air Assault Using Faulty Intelligence,” *Telegraph*, March 5, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/12184592/US-drawing-up-plans-for-Libya-air-assault-using-faulty-intelligence.html>.

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch interviews with a Misrata military intelligence official, two Misrata-based fighters with Libya Dawn, and an exiled Sirte city councilman, March 24-28, 2016, further details withheld.

¹⁶ Investigation by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on Libya, February 15, 2016, www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/LY/A_HRC_31_CRP_3.pdf, paras 283-84, 286. The report also said an ISIS affiliate had abducted and sexually abused at least two children in Libya but did not disclose where these incidents took place.

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch interviews with more than according to residents, local authorities, and Libyan and foreign security analysts, Misrata, March 24-28, 2016, and by telephone and email, March-May 2016.

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with Western diplomat, Tunis, March 30, 2016.

of the organization, they said.¹⁹ However “the power is in the hands of the foreigners,” said “Hassan,” an exiled tribal sheikh from Sirte.²⁰

Tunisians are the largest group of foreign ISIS members in Sirte, but recruits also come from Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Chad, Sudan, Senegal, Mali, Yemen, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, residents and fighters from rival forces said.²¹ Most members entered through Libya’s porous southern border, a Libyan military intelligence official and international security analysts said.²² Some recruits had been migrant laborers in Libya. Residents said they could identify foreign fighters by their accents, clothing or *noms de guerre*, which sometimes included a reference to their nationality. ISIS is paying monthly salaries that amount to US \$100 or more—a high wage for many recruits—plus free food and housing for themselves and their families, they said.

Most ISIS fighters and even traffic police wear military uniforms and many wear balaclavas, but imams, judges and morality police generally are not masked, residents said.

ISIS has exploited divisions in Sirte that have festered since Libya’s 2011 uprising between loyalists of former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi—a Sirte native who made the city his second capital—and residents with ties to families or militias in Misrata, according to exiled residents and foreign security analysts.²³ “Certain neighborhoods and tribes that felt excluded from the new order and were repressed by Misrata have welcomed the Islamic State,” said Frederic Wehrey, a senior associate with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.²⁴

¹⁹ Former residents, fighters from rival forces and exiled Sirte councilmen gave Human Rights Watch the names of 15 Libyans who they said played important roles in Sirte operations in ISIS. The names were confirmed by a Misrata military intelligence official.

²⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with “Hassan,” Misrata, March 27, 2016.

²¹ Human Rights Watch interviews with more than 30 residents and former fighters, Misrata, March 24-28, 2016, and by telephone and internet, March –April 2016.

²² Human Rights Watch interviews with Misrata military intelligence official, Misrata, March 27, 2016, a Western diplomat, Tunis, March 30, 2016, and two international security analysts by telephone and email, April 2016.

²³ Human Rights Watch interviews with more than 20 residents of Sirte in Misrata, March 24-28, 2016, and by telephone and Internet, March-April 2016. See also Eye on ISIS in Libya website posting, “ISIS in Action,” May 9, 2016, <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-9-may-2016/>, and Issandr El Amrani, “How Much of Libya Does the Islamic State Control?,” *Foreign Policy*, February 18, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/18/how-much-of-libya-does-the-islamic-state-control/>

²⁴ Frederic Wehrey, Senior Associate, Middle East Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, email to Human Rights Watch, May 11, 2016.

From February to May 2011, Misrata was besieged by Gaddafi's forces with near-daily indiscriminate attacks that killed about 1,000 of its citizens. The following October, Misrata-based militias killed Gaddafi and brutally beat and executed captive members of Gaddafi's convoy by the Misrata militia members.²⁵

Now, ISIS has raised its black flag at Sirte's vast Ouagadougou complex, which Gaddafi built to host summits with world leaders, and has summoned local men and boys to the complex's conference hall for religious instruction and speeches praising its self-declared caliphate.

"The final stage of the revolution was in Sirte," said an exile from the city, "Ali," referring to the 2011 uprising against Gaddafi. "We were filled with hope. Then step by step, Daesh [ISIS] took over. Now we feel we are cursed."²⁶

²⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Death of a Dictator: Bloody Vengeance in Sirte*, October 2012, <http://hrw.org/reports/2012/10/16/death-dictator-o>.

²⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with "Ali," Misrata, March 27, 2016.

II. Abuses in Sirte under ISIS

‘Charter for the City’

In August 2015, the month it took over all of Sirte, ISIS circulated a “Charter for the City,” as it had done in cities it controls in Iraq and Syria. The 13-point charter proclaims that “people under our rule are safe and sound,” offering protection even to fighters who sought to oust them, provided they repent and do not “defend the invaders.” However, the charter warns, enemy forces that do not repent face death and thieves face amputation.

The charter outlaws “all taboos” including selling or consuming drugs and alcohol, and smoking. It “encourages” residents to pray “all together, and on time” in local mosques. It rejects gatherings, political parties, and flags or insignia, and says polytheistic or pagan shrines must be razed. The document orders women to cover themselves in “loose robes and veil,” to spend their time “settling in the home ... refraining from leaving unless necessary.” All public funds belong to ISIS, the document says.

ISIS quickly began enforcing the charter, according to all former residents interviewed by Human Rights Watch, aided by neighborhood vigilantes who informed on suspected enemy fighters and spies, women leaving the home without the group’s mandated covering, thieves, and people smoking cigarettes, even in the privacy of their homes.²⁷

Killings

ISIS carries out executions of perceived enemies in Sirte’s central Martyrs Square, closing off traffic and summoning residents on loudspeakers to watch, according to all residents interviewed. ISIS publicly decapitated at least two people with swords and in most other cases shot them dead in the head, more than a dozen residents said. Those the group deemed “spies” were first shot dead, then dangled from scaffolding for two to three days at Zaafran roundabout on the western edge of the city, in an act that the residents referred to as “crucifixions.”

²⁷ Human Rights Watch interviews with 45 former and current Sirte residents in Misrata, March 24-28, 2016, and by telephone and Internet, March-April 2016.

ISIS dressed many of those it executed in orange jumpsuits, in an apparent reference to the uniforms once worn by detainees at the US military prison at Guantanamo Bay.²⁸ ISIS also has killed local fighters, government officials or members of families that opposed the group in drive-by shootings, all those interviewed said.

ISIS appeared to target fighters, policemen, and intelligence and government officials, particularly those with close family or clan ties to Misrata, all of those interviewed said. People in these categories account for most of the 130 names on a “kill list” that ISIS keeps in the Sirte courthouse, exiled residents—including three people who said they are on that list—told Human Rights Watch.

“Salem,” who was visiting Misrata for medical treatment when Human Rights Watch interviewed him, said he lived in constant fear of being targeted because he was a former government employee:

I do not leave my house except to go to the mosque: house to mosque, mosque to house. I keep my head down. I would stay in Misrata but I can’t afford the rents here. Everyone wants to leave Sirte if they can find a way.²⁹

From mid-February 2015 to mid-February 2016, ISIS killed at least 49 people in the city of Sirte and outlying areas after largely secret proceedings that negate the most basic international fair-trial standards, Human Rights Watch found. During a trip to Misrata in March 2016, Human Rights Watch gathered information on 28 Libyans killed by ISIS.³⁰ Human Rights Watch previously documented the ISIS executions of 21 Coptic Christians, 20 of whom were Egyptians, on a Sirte beach in February 2015.³¹

Human Rights Watch interviewed family members of seven people who were killed by ISIS in Sirte or outlying areas, as well as acquaintances of three others. Human Rights Watch

²⁸ ISIS has released multiple images of those it is killing or has killed in orange jumpsuits that are widely available on social media. Human Rights Watch is not linking to these and many other images released by ISIS because of their graphic content.

²⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with “Salem,” Misrata, March 26, 2016.

³⁰ Dozens of current and exiled residents including three Sirte city councilmen gave Human Rights Watch the names and other details of the 28 Libyans, which Human Rights Watch cross-checked with sources including media reports and videos.

³¹ Human Rights Watch, “Libya/Egypt: Murder of Egyptians a War Crime,” press release, February 15, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/.../libya/egypt-murder-egyptians-war-crime>.

also interviewed four people who said they witnessed executions by ISIS or saw the corpses of people ISIS had executed and then displayed in public areas.

Those killed by ISIS in Sirte city and district included members of enemy forces who were unable to fight because they were wounded or detained, which is a war crime.

Killed for Cursing

ISIS executed Amjad bin Sasi, 23, in December 2015, finding that he had “insulted God,” two family members told Human Rights Watch.³² Bin Sasi had recently joined a local force that was loyal to Libya Dawn, the coalition that had tried to rout ISIS from Sirte before retreating in June 2015. It was bin Sasi’s second run-in with the law. The previous year, before ISIS took control of Sirte, Ansar al-Sharia had jailed and flogged him for drinking.

In the second, fatal incident, ISIS enforcers burst into bin Sasi’s home and hauled him to jail for allegedly naming God while swearing as he brawled with a neighbor earlier that day, the two family members said. The following day, bin Sasi’s captors brought him before an ISIS judge in the main city courthouse, according to the relatives, who said they received the account from two former prisoners who had been in the courtroom that day.



Amjad bin Sasi was executed by ISIS in Sirte in December 2015 for “insulting God.” © 2015 Private

“The judge wanted Amjad to repent for opposing Daesh, but Amjad insulted the judge and spit at him,” said “Ibrahim,” one of bin Sasi’s relatives. Bin Sasi had no access to counsel, the relatives said. Two days later, ISIS executed bin Sasi in Martyrs Square.

³² Human Rights Watch interviews, March 2016. Further details withheld.

The family members gave Human Rights Watch three photos of bin Sasi. The first photo shows him a few weeks before his arrest, in sunglasses and a “Timberland” jersey, clean-shaven, chin tilted jauntily and his hair slicked high on his head. Bin Sasi would shave when he visited a family member in Misrata, then grow his beard when he returned to Sirte, the two relatives said.

The second photo, bearing an ISIS media logo, shows bin Sasi kneeling on a stage in a black shirt and white trousers. A man seen only from shoulders down, dressed in an Afghan-style tunic and trousers, points a handgun at the back of bin Sasi’s head.

“Applying in Sirte the *hadd* decision of Allah on someone who insulted God,” the photo caption reads. The term *hadd* refers to a punishment for crimes against God. A crowd of men, most of them masked, stands behind the gunman, watching. The third photo shows the same crowd, but this time bin Sasi is lying motionless on his back.

“We still have not received his body,” said Ibrahim. “ISIS said, ‘He is *kafir* [a non-Muslim], so you cannot bury him in a Muslim cemetery.’”

‘Crucified’ in ‘Guantanamo’ Jumpsuit

ISIS also refused to hand over the body of Milad Ahmed Abourgheba, 44, who had fought with a rival force, after “crucifying” him and hanging him from scaffolding in an orange jumpsuit in January 2016.

A relative of Abourgheba and a fellow fighter told Human Rights Watch that Abourgheba had fought with a local force aligned with Libya Dawn and fled to Misrata in mid-2015. A few months later, they said, Abourgheba returned to Sirte, surrendered himself to ISIS and performed the *tawba*, an Islamic act of repentance for past sins.³³ ISIS, however, suspected Abourgheba was a spy.

³³ Human Rights Watch interview with “Ali” and a fighter, Misrata, March 27, 2016. Further details withheld.



Milad Ahmed Abourgheba was shot dead and hung from scaffolding in an orange jumpsuit by ISIS in Sirte in January 2016. The group labeled him a spy. © 2015 Private

On the morning of October 17, 2015, armed ISIS enforcers broke into Abourgheba's home and took him from his bed, according to the relative and fellow fighter, who were told this by Abourgheba's wife and neighbors, who witnessed the kidnapping. "Ali," the relative, described what happened next:

He disappeared for three months. Then on January 16 [2016], they shot him dead. The man who shot him was Tunisian and was in a wheelchair. They shot him in public and then they crucified him for three days in Zaafran Square.

The two sources showed Human Rights Watch a photo of Abourgheba's corpse, clad in an orange jumpsuit, hanging from scaffolding. On a rail above his head a sign reads, "A Spy of Libya Dawn."

One British newspaper quoted a fighter as saying Abourgheba had been an informant.³⁴ The relative and fellow fighter interviewed by Human Rights Watch said Abourgheba had returned to Sirte because he came from a poor family, could not find work in Misrata and had no way to support his wife and young child. They said any proceedings ISIS may have carried out against Abourgheba were not made public.

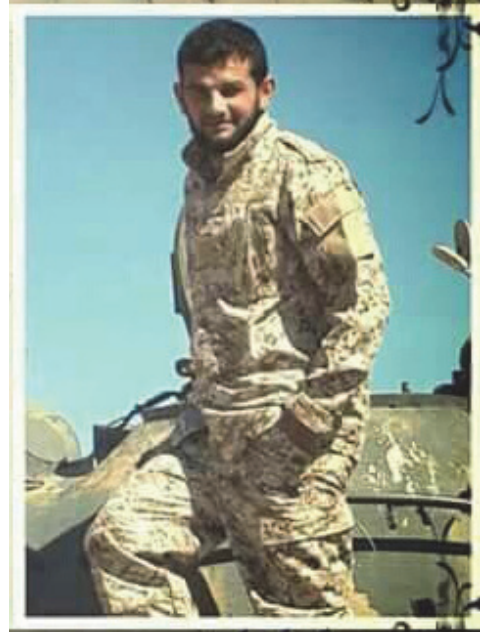
³⁴ Colin Freeman, "Isil uses advertising hoardings to crucify 'spies' in its new Libyan 'caliphate,'" *The Telegraph*, February 4, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/12140026/Isis-uses-advertising-hoardings-to-crucify-spies-in-its-new-Libyan-caliphate.html>.

Executed While Wounded

Mohamed al-Hanash, an elder from Sirte, said ISIS shot dead his son Abd al-Salam as he lay wounded and immobile on the battlefield in Harawa, a town in Sirte district, on March 24, 2015.³⁵ Abd al-Salam al-Hanash, who was 24 or 25, was a machine-gunner with Libya Dawn's Brigade 166. He fell from the top of his armored vehicle after he was wounded in the thigh from ISIS artillery fire, his father said he was told by four other sons, who were in the same platoon.

"He was alive at the beginning. Then he fell after he was wounded. ... He couldn't run away or stand," Mohamed al-Hanash said. "I feel like I am about to explode from sadness."

The platoon retreated, blocked by ISIS forces from rescuing the two wounded fighters, the father said his other sons told him. When members of Brigade 166 went looking for the dead and wounded after the battle, they found Abd al-Salam al-Hanash dead, shot twice at close range in the head. ISIS was the only force in the area after their retreat, he said.



Abd al-Salam al-Siwi al-Hanash, a machine-gunner with Brigade 166, was shot dead by ISIS fighters as he lay wounded in Harawa, a town in Sirte district on March 24, 2015. © 2015 Private

Shot for Sermon

ISIS also has summarily executed people who called on the local population to oppose them, several local residents said. In one case, on March 8, 2015, ISIS killed Khaled bin Rajab, a Salafist imam from the powerful Al-Farjan tribe, a day after he gave a sermon in Mosque in Sirte's District 3 in which he called on local inhabitants to rise against the group, according to former residents including "Omar," who said he witnessed the killing:

Sheikh Khaled preached that Daesh [ISIS] had to be stopped because they were killing people. The next day, after *al-asr* prayer, a car with the *Dawla al-Islamiya* [Islamic State] flag and insignia stopped in front of the mosque.

³⁵ Human Rights Watch interviews with Mohamed al-Hanash, Misrata, March 24 and March 28, 2016.

They shot sheikh Khaled from the car window. Five bullets hit him including two bullets in the chest. After that supporters of Sheikh Khaled started an intifada [against ISIS] in the streets. This was the last battle before ISIS took over the whole city.³⁶

ISIS beheaded and hung some of the bodies of fighters it killed in the uprising in public areas, four residents told Human Rights Watch. In a February 2016 report, the UN human rights office said four corpses were hung from poles.³⁷ One media report said 12 corpses were beheaded and displayed.³⁸ Degrading treatment of those killed in battle can be a war crime.³⁹

Beheaded for ‘Sorcery’

On October 15, 2015, ISIS also beheaded two local men in Martyrs Square whom they accused of being “sorcerers.” ISIS released a video of the execution—later posted on mainstream social media sites—titled “And the Magician Will Not Succeed Wherever He Is,” a reference to a verse in the Quran. Four residents who fled Sirte identified the two men as Saed al-Madani, who was in his 70s or 80s, and Adil Ali Hafith, in his 50s.⁴⁰

The video shows three ISIS enforcers wearing uniforms of Afghan-style grey tunics and trousers flogging four men for alleged adultery and drinking. Then the video shows al-Madani and Hafith, blindfolded and clad in orange jumpsuits. Two masked men in black, one of whom is tall and carries a curved sword with a meter-long blade, pushes al-Madani’s and Hafith’s heads down. One scene shows white-haired al-Madani kneeling with his head over a black plank as the swordsman lifts his sword high, then strikes. An ISIS member is shown in the video telling a crowd of men, and at least two young boys, that the two men were found guilty of sorcery. But none of the former residents or exiled Sirte officials interviewed by Human Rights Watch said they had been informed of any trial.

³⁶ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with “Omar,” March 26, 2016. Further details withheld.

³⁷ Investigation by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on Libya, A/HRC/31/CRP.3, February 15, 2016, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/LY/A_HRC_31_CRP_3.pdf OHCHR report.

³⁸ “ISIS ‘beheads’ 12 in battle for Libya’s Sirte: Reports,” *Daily News and Analysis India*, August 15, 2015, <http://www.dnaindia.com/world/report-isis-beheads-12-in-battle-for-libya-s-sirte-reports-2114817>

³⁹ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rule 156, Definition of War Crimes, https://www.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule156#top.

⁴⁰ Human Rights Watch interviews with four Sirte residents, Misrata, March 24-28, 2016, further details withheld. Human Rights Watch is not linking to this or other videos referenced in this report due to their graphic nature.

Resident “Mahmoud” said he saw al-Madani’s execution. “They encouraged people to watch,” he said. “When the big man [executioner] finished the job he raised the head for the crowd to see.”⁴¹

The two men tried to exorcise people possessed by the devil, three of the residents interviewed on this case said. ISIS also killed a Moroccan woman whom the group accused of sorcery in late 2015, several former residents said—an incident also reported by international media.⁴²

Disappeared, Presumed Dead

ISIS also has forcibly disappeared scores of enemy fighters whom they captured off the battlefield, and most are presumed dead, exiled Sirte city council members and enemy fighters said. Widespread or systematic enforced disappearances imposed, as a policy, by a non-state organized political organization can be a crime against humanity.⁴³

In one case, on August 5, 2015, ISIS kidnapped two members of Libya Dawn’s Brigade 166 outside a pharmacy in District 1 in front of several witnesses, relatives told Human Rights Watch.⁴⁴ Two vehicles bearing the ISIS flags blocked the Brigade 166 members’ car, then masked men in military uniforms jumped out and took the two men away, they said.

For weeks, family members tried to obtain information on the two disappeared men, including at Ribat Mosque, where ISIS would receive questions from the public. Finally, on October 25, family members were let in to see a judge at the central courthouse. The judge was bearded and dressed in an Afghan-style tunic and trousers, and spoke with a Tunisian accent, according to one of the relatives, “Abu Amir”: “He was holding a paper with names

⁴¹ Human Rights Watch interview with “Mahmoud,” Misrata, March 27, 2016.

⁴² “IS executes woman for ‘witchcraft,’” Agence France-Presse (AFP), December 15, 2015, <https://www.enca.com/africa/executes-woman-witchcraft>. AFP quoted Libya media agencies as reporting at the same time that ISIS also shot dead a Palestinian man for alleged spying and chopped off a Libyan man’s hand for stealing in Sirte. Human Rights Watch could not independently confirm these reports.

⁴³ ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rule 98, Enforced Disappearance, https://www.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v2_cha_chapter32_rule98_SectionA.

⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch interviews with “Abu Amir” and “Zayed,” two family members of one of the forcibly disappeared men, March 2016. Further details withheld. At the request of one relative who feared reprisals, Human Rights Watch also is not releasing the names of the men who were disappeared.

on it. He said, ‘Your [relative] is dead. He is *kafir*, and we will not let him be buried with the Muslims.’”

Another relative, “Zayed,” said ISIS refused to provide further information on either disappeared fighter. “To this day, we do not know where they were held, or whether they appeared before a court, or what charges were held against them, or how they were killed,” he said.

Courts and Prisons

ISIS operates at least three prisons in Sirte, former residents and exiled city council members said.⁴⁵ The Hisba (morality police) prison, in Ribat neighborhood, is housed in a former kindergarten, they said.

A second prison, for common crimes, is inside the former Libyan Central Bank building, where ISIS has hoisted a sign reading “Islamic Police Station.” A regularly updated list of people ISIS has jailed, flogged or fined is posted at the Hisba offices, said one of the former residents, who remains in contact with family members inside Sirte.

A third prison, inside the local government courthouse, is for those who are accused of the most serious crimes, such as spying on ISIS for “secularists” and “crusaders.” ISIS also uses the building as a court, but has placed former judges on its kill list and installed its own judges, who are foreign.

The courts generally deliver opinions promptly, said an exiled lawyer and four residents whose families had gone before the courts.⁴⁶ All residents interviewed said common crimes have dropped in Sirte under ISIS’s constant patrols and because of the fear of severe punishments. “Jamal,” whose work brought him into contact with court proceedings, told Human Rights Watch:

People accept the judgments without arguing, for fear of punishment. (...)

The executions, they are not as frequent as some media report. The amputations, there are very few. But the floggings and imprisonments,

⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch interviews with five former residents including a lawyer and two exiled city council members, Misrata, March 24-28, 2016, and by telephone, March 2016. Further details withheld.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

there are many cases of that. After the revolution, Sirte had many robberies and killings. But now it is the safest place in Libya. Shops stay unlocked when their owners are at prayer yet no one will dare enter.⁴⁷

As a condition of release, ISIS makes prisoners perform the *tawba* and swear loyalty to ISIS, a former prisoner and five relatives and friends of former prisoners told Human Rights Watch.

Human Rights Watch interviewed one man who had been detained by ISIS, as well as relatives or close associates of ten other former prisoners. Most were suspected fighters but three were jailed for selling or smoking cigarettes.

“Abu Ibrahim” said ISIS detained him and gave him 10 lashes after one its patrols found cigarettes and music, both forbidden by ISIS, in his car at a checkpoint in September 2015 on the Sirte city limits:

One of the men, who was Tunisian based on his accent, asked me if I smoked. I replied that I didn’t. In fact I smoke but I lied because I was scared. He searched my car and found some CDs of music, and three cartons of cigarettes. He started insulting me and told me to drive to the Hisba office. They followed me in their car. At that place they told me to pledge to quit smoking, which I did, and then they whipped me 10 times on my back with a leather whip.⁴⁸

“Abu Ibrahim” said a relative with influence in Sirte persuaded ISIS to release him after a few hours.

“Um Ali” said 15 ISIS members burst into her home in the middle of the night in December 2015 and took away two male relatives for selling cigarettes:

They had guns. They turned the house upside down. One of them raised his mask as if to say, “Here I am!” He was from Sirte. They took the money and

⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with “Jamal,” March 2016. Further details withheld.

⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with “Abu Ibrahim,” Misrata, March 25, 2016. Further details withheld.

the gold. They kept [the two male relatives] in prison for many days. When they got out they told us they were whipped with electric cables and forced to read the Quran. They said they beat them very hard. They had to sign papers promising never to sell cigarettes again.⁴⁹

The two detainees were not provided access to counsel or allowed to mount a defense, but ISIS released one of them after a few days because he was suffering severe health problems unrelated to detention, “Um Ali” said.

One man whom ISIS imprisoned for a month in 2015 was threatened with beheading and heard screams of other prisoners who sounded as if they were being tortured, according to “Tareq,” a close associate. The former prisoner said he was too scared to meet with Human Rights Watch and designated the associate to speak on his behalf on the condition that certain details were withheld. ISIS detained the man in an effort to extort his place of work, “Tareq” said. The man said he was taken to an interrogation room and questioned by three masked men who described to him in detail where he lived and worked and details about his activities outside Sirte, according to “Tareq.”⁵⁰

Two family members of prisoners interviewed by Human Rights Watch said ISIS released their captives when prominent family members from Sirte intervened. Others said that elders with influence often failed to persuade ISIS judges and other functionaries—nearly all of whom were foreign—to release prisoners, or to confirm the whereabouts of forcibly disappeared persons.

Looting and Destroying Homes

ISIS has destroyed at least 20 homes in Sirte belonging to fighters from prominent local families who joined militias trying to oust the group, even though the fighters were not in the homes at the time and the families had fled, according to several residents who fled. ISIS also has looted and confiscated local businesses, and given homes of local government officials, enemy armed forces and policemen to its foreign fighters, they said.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with “Um Ali,” Misrata, March 28, 2016. Further details withheld.

⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch interview, March 2016. Further details withheld.

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch interviews with more than 25 current or exiled Sirte residents, including exiled city councilmen, Misrata, March 24-28, 2016, and by telephone or Internet, March-April 2016.

Those who accused ISIS of stealing and destroying their homes included Mohamed al-Hanash, the Sirte elder whose son was killed by ISIS as he lay wounded on a battlefield in March 2015 (see above). Al-Hanash and another member of his family showed Human Rights Watch photos of two large, sturdy homes before and after ISIS reduced them to rubble, according to their accounts, in June 2015 after they had fled. They said neighbors told them that before blowing up the homes, ISIS took all the furniture, refrigerators, televisions, and other belongings.⁵²

Al-Hanash said he had owned food and farm-supply shops in Sirte but that ISIS took them over and put in their own managers. “We ran from Sirte with only the clothes on our back,” al-Hanash said. “Even if ISIS is defeated, what do we have to go home to?”

“Ali” said ISIS took everything from his home after he fled in January 2015, even his daughter’s pet parrot. “They take the nicest homes and give them to their fighters,” he said.⁵³

In December 2015, ISIS released a video through one of its media wings showing its enforcers destroying several gravestones that purportedly were in Sirte. Two displaced residents and a journalist with contacts in Sirte told Human Rights Watch that the incident took place and that the graves being destroyed were in Sirte’s Bin Hamal cemetery. One source said he recognized the gravestones that ISIS was destroying, which were large and ornate and belonged to former senior associates of Gaddafi.⁵⁴

⁵² Human Rights Watch interviews with Mohamed Al-Hanash, March 24 and 28, 2016, Misrata, and a second family member, March 24, 2016, Misrata.

⁵³ Human Rights Watch interview with “Ali,” Misrata, March 27, 2016.

⁵⁴ Human Rights Watch interviews with two former residents and a journalist, Misrata, March 24-28, 2016, and by telephone and Internet, April 2016. Further details withheld.

Forced Prayer, Religious Instruction and Allegiance

Since August 2015 armed ISIS enforcers have combed the streets at prayer times, herding residents into mosques and ordering merchants to close their shops from the start of the prayer of *al-Asr* in the mid-afternoon until the end of the prayer of *al-Isha* after nightfall, current and displaced residents said. The punishment for not attending or for failing to close shops during prayer hour was flogging, they said.⁵⁵ Nearly all Sirte inhabitants are Sunni Muslims, but before ISIS took over the city not all residents attended all five daily prayer sessions at their local mosques.



An ISIS lecture on Sharia (Islamic law) at the Ouagadougou complex in Sirte, Libya, where former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi once hosted summits with world leaders. The caption in Arabic reads: “Speech by one of the brothers (why we are holding Sharia sessions)” ISIS 2016 image, circulated on social media.

Starting in March 2016, five residents said, ISIS morality police also began forcing men and boys ages 15 and older to attend two-week courses in religious training at their local mosques, with a follow-up session at the Ouagadougou conference hall in April.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ All current and former Sirte residents interviewed by Human Rights Watch described the forced prayer.

⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch interviews with five former and current Sirte residents, Misrata, March 24-28, 2016, and by telephone or Internet, March-April 2016,

“Farrah,” a grandmother, said she fled with her two adult sons after ISIS “invited” the two men to join the sessions:

First they said, “Come to class, it is voluntary.” Then they sent papers pushing them to go. Then they asked them to join ISIS. That is when we had to leave. We left with nothing but the coats on our backs. Now we are living six families in one home—two bedrooms for 27 people. What choice did we have?⁵⁷

ISIS did not make women attend, but “they broadcast the sermons so loudly over the mosque loudspeakers that it was almost impossible not to hear it,” “Laila,” a woman who left Sirte in March, told Human Rights Watch.⁵⁸

Restricting Education, Communications

ISIS’s restrictions on education have led to the suspension of classes at Sirte University, former residents told Human Rights Watch.⁵⁹ Students and staff boycotted the university in November 2015 after ISIS ordered its 16,000 male and female students to attend class in separate shifts, they said. ISIS also closed faculties including law, languages, literature and art, saying they contradicted Islamic teachings, two former residents said. Most students have left Sirte and transferred to colleges in smaller cities and towns, while others simply dropped out, former residents said.

State-run primary and secondary schools remain open, though classes are smaller because of the population exodus, the residents and exiled Sirte city council members said. In these schools, ISIS has canceled some history classes and sends in instructors to quiz students on their knowledge of Islamic history and law, according to four former residents with family members who had attended primary and secondary schools, including a former primary school teacher in Sirte. ISIS also expanded the segregation of classes for boys and girls, a process that Ansar al-Sharia, which controlled Sirte before ISIS took over, had already begun, three residents who fled said.

⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with “Farrah,” Misrata, March 25, 2016. Further details withheld.

⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with “Laila,” Misrata, March 28, 2016. Further details withheld.

⁵⁹ Human Rights Watch interviews with 10 former residents, including exiled Sirte council members and a former university student, in Misrata, March 24-28, 2016, and by telephone or Internet, March-April 2016.

“The competitions test kids’ knowledge of traditional Islamic stories and practice,” said “Jamal,” a resident who had witnessed the quizzes before leaving Sirte in early March 2016. “Students are asked such questions as, ‘What is the correct way to perform the *fajr* [Muslim dawn prayer]?’ ‘What is the importance of the *hijab* [female headdress] in Islam?’ ‘Who is the current caliph of all Muslims?’” The answer instructors sought to the last question was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, they said.⁶⁰

ISIS gave students candies and sometimes traditional Islamic clothing for answering the questions correctly, Jamal said.

“Um Ali,” who had two children in Sirte schools before she and her family fled in December 2015, said many parents have withdrawn children from school out of fear that ISIS might brainwash them. ISIS enforcers peer through the windows to ensure students are not violating dress codes, and will haul students to the Hisba building if they start debating politics, she said.⁶¹

ISIS also has severely restricted freedom of speech, not only through its demands of allegiance but also by disabling all phone networks in Sirte after taking control of the city, allowing inhabitants to make calls only through calling centers.⁶² Some residents used satellite dishes if they could afford them, but ISIS in early 2016 banned satellite dishes as well, three former residents said. Hisba police routinely take residents’ cellphones to check their contents, three former residents said.

Rules for Women’s Movements, Clothing

In August, ISIS began forcing all women and girls as young as 10 or 11 to cover themselves from head to toe in a loose black *abaya* outside their homes, and to never leave without a *mahram*, a male relative such as a husband, brother or father.

A decree that ISIS posted on a Sirte billboard, a photo of which was obtained by Human Rights Watch, displays the black, unadorned *abaya* and *niqab* headdress that women should wear, with seven instructions:

⁶⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with “Jamal,” March 2016. Further details withheld.

⁶¹ Human Rights Watch interview with “Um Ali,” March 28, 2016.

⁶² Nearly all 45 former and current Sirte residents interviewed by Human Rights Watch noted the communications restrictions.

- First: It must be substantial (thick) and not transparent to show anything beneath it
- Second: It must be loose (wide and not tight)
- Third: It must cover the whole body
- Fourth: It must not be extravagant or celebrity-like
- Fifth: It must not resemble the clothing of female infidels and men
- Sixth: It must not be decorative clothing that attracts attention
- Seventh: It must not be scented (with cologne or incense)

A red circular stamp on the document reads: “The Office of *Himma* (“Resilience”).⁶³

If ISIS morality police spot women and girls who disobey the dress code, they fine and flog one of their male relatives, often on the spot, several residents said.

“We had to cover everything including our faces,” said “Huda,” 28, who fled in March. “If you show your hands, they fine your husband 75 dinars [US \$58]. If you show your feet, it’s 150 dinars [US \$116]. The second time it happens they give the husband a warning. The third time it happens, they whip him. We had to have a male escort even to go shopping. We had no choice. Women in Sirte cannot object.”⁶⁴

“Ahlam” said she and her husband were stopped in their car one day in early 2016 in Sirte by an ISIS enforcer: “He made me raise my hands and when he saw they were bare he shouted at my husband to make me put on my gloves.”⁶⁵

The two women told Human Rights Watch that mothers began covering daughters as young as eight to ensure their husbands were not flogged or fined.

⁶³ A copy of the photo is on file with Human Rights Watch.

⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with “Huda,” Misrata, March 28, 2016. Further details withheld. This sum and all others in this report are converted at the official rate of 1.3 Libyan dinars to the US dollar at time of writing, however due to the currency crisis most Libyans change their money on the black market, where the dinar-to-dollar exchange rate is nearly three times higher.

⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with “Ahlam,” Misrata, March 28, 2016. Further details withheld.



A photo of a billboard in Sirte, Libya, released by ISIS media, lists seven rules for women's abayas, which must be "bulky" and cover their entire bodies. The Arabic captions (L to R) read, "Islamic State" and "Erecting preaching billboards in the city of Sirte."

Shop owners are whipped and fined and their shops are closed if they receive an unaccompanied woman, residents who fled told Human Rights Watch.⁶⁶ Shops are banned from selling perfume, accessories that Hisba enforcers deem ornate, or frilly underwear, five former residents said. "You can buy underwear but you have to go to specific stores approved by ISIS, which controls the merchandise," said one displaced resident, "Omar."⁶⁷ ISIS even banned plastic figurines to display women's clothing, one displaced resident said.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch interviews with 15 former and current Sirte residents, Misrata, March 24-28, 2016, and by telephone and Internet, March-April 2016. Further details withheld.

⁶⁷ Human Rights Watch telephone interview with "Omar," March 26, 2016. Further details withheld.

⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with "Hamza," Misrata, March 27, 2016. Further details withheld.

ISIS also has restrictions on clothing for men and adolescent boys, residents who fled said. Trousers must be cut “Afghan style,” ending well above the ankle. “If a man wears jeans, they tell him to fold them up to cover only part of his shin,” said “Hamza.” “They order the barbers not to shave beards. And if they don’t respect these orders they get flogged or fined, and they [ISIS enforcers] close the shop.”⁶⁹

Pressure to Wed ISIS Fighters

In September 2015, media reported that a local ISIS leader called on fathers in Sirte to “marry off their daughters” to the group’s fighters.⁷⁰ ISIS members have approached some young women and girls or their families to request that they marry members of the group, three former residents told Human Rights Watch. One man, “Zayed,” said that ISIS also has called in sermons for couples to divorce if the husband was in the Libyan armed forces, then remarry if the soldier repented and swore allegiance to ISIS.⁷¹

The former resident “Ali” said a close female relative fled in March after a Saudi fighter approached her and asked to marry her. “She told him she would think about it,” he said. “Then she left.”⁷²

Taxation

ISIS impose a *zakat* (religious tax) on merchants and farmers. The Hisba police collect the taxes, which are levied on a sliding scale depending on the value of a property. One former shopkeeper, “Ahmed,” said that in October 2015 ISIS enforcers demanded 150 Libyan dinars (US \$115) from average-sized shops including his for that month, then returned a few days later and demanded 5,000 Libyan dinars (US \$3,406) for all of 2015, retroactively.⁷³

Farmers must hand over one out of every ten sheep and one out of every five camels to ISIS, said five residents who had paid the tax or whose families had done so.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ “Deliver your daughters to us, militants tell Libyan city,” *Times of London*, September 5, 2015, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article4548001.ece>.

⁷¹ Human Rights Watch interview with “Zayed,” March 2016. Further details withheld.

⁷² Human Rights Watch interview with “Ali,” Misrata, March 27, 2016.

⁷³ Human Rights Watch interview with “Ahmed,” Misrata, March 28, 2016.

Basic Services for Fighters, Not Local Population

The “Charter for the City” that ISIS issued in August 2015 in Sirte promises to keep those who accept its edicts “safe and sound.” Yet even as it taxes Sirte’s residents, ISIS has failed to provide them with basic services that they make available to its members, all former and current residents interviewed said.

The 300-bed Ibn Sina public hospital and local public clinics initially remained open after ISIS took control, but those facilities are now empty as nearly all doctors and nurses have fled, according to all former and current residents who spoke with Human Rights Watch, including two health-care workers. Some private clinics remain open but they are too expensive for most residents.

ISIS commandeered the few doctors still practicing in private clinics for its members and their families, former residents said.⁷⁴ The group has hijacked truckloads of medicine, three former residents said. One exiled councilman said ISIS also seized the ambulances.⁷⁵ Almost no food is available in the city, all residents interviewed said. Local prices of fuel are four times higher than they are elsewhere in oil-rich Libya, more than a dozen residents said. Suppliers stopped driving to Sirte after ISIS members began hijacking their drivers, vehicles and goods, exiled Sirte government officials and merchants said. “There is no food or medicine even for babies,” said the former prisoner “Abu Ibrahim.”

ISIS closed all local banks and turned one of them, the Bank of Commerce and Development, into the ISIS-run House of Islamic Money, which provides US dollars and Euros as well as Libyan currency to its members but not to the public, an exiled city councilmen and six other displaced residents said.

ISIS allows most residents to travel to other cities to obtain supplies and health care. But questioning at multiple checkpoints—manned by ISIS on the perimeter of Sirte and by armed forces opposing ISIS closer to Misrata—can nearly triple driving time to six hours,

⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch interviews with 10 former and current residents, Misrata, March 24-28, 2016, and by telephone and Internet, March-April 2016.

⁷⁵ The website “Eye on ISIS in Libya” reported on March 29, 2016, that ISIS seized 25 ambulances. See <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/isis-in-action/action-29-march-2016/>.

making trips for provisions or medical services both costly and time consuming, the residents said.

All former and current residents interviewed complained that Misrata branches of their banks often would not let them withdraw any or much of their cash as soon as they realized they were from Sirte. Libya is in the throes of an acute currency shortage and banks are rationing withdrawals across the country, but the Sirte residents said the Misrata banks were saving whatever cash they had for local residents.

Several former and current residents contrasted the lack of necessities with the amenities that ISIS gave its fighters, enforcers and other members. One resident, “Mahmoud,” travels regularly to Sirte for business:

There are no vegetables or meat. Most shops are closed. Meanwhile the Daesh [ISIS] is living in our houses and having barbeques. They have five shops in Sirte that supply them food, five-star food. These shops are always receiving supplies. They have enough fuel to drive big four-by-four trucks. They have their own doctors they use when they are sick.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with “Mahmoud,” Misrata, March 27, 2016.

III. The Fate of Those Displaced from Sirte

More than two-thirds of Sirte's 80,000 residents have fled since a small number of ISIS fighters entered Sirte in late 2014, according to several residents including three exiled Sirte councilmen.

There are no camps in Libya for people who fled Sirte. Many displaced residents are staying with family members or renting homes in towns and cities including Misrata, Bani Walid, al-Bayda, al-Jufra and Tripoli, the Libyan capital 280 miles west of Sirte. But many residents cannot afford the rents, which in Misrata are 700 to 1,500 Libyan dinars (US \$538 to US \$1,155) a month, a small fortune for many Libyans.⁷⁷ Some large families are crowding into one small room. In al-Jufra, a district 220 miles south of Sirte, scores of residents are sleeping in makeshift homes in a park, an activist from the area told Human Rights Watch.⁷⁸

Residents from Sirte who sought shelter in Misrata said they have received almost no emergency assistance apart from a few handouts of food, bedding and cleaning supplies sent by international aid organizations. "We can't eat or drink cleaning fluid," one 74-year-old man who fled Sirte told Human Rights Watch.⁷⁹

The directors of the local branch of Libyan Red Crescent—one of the few aid agencies still operating in the country—and of Misrata's social services office confirmed the lack of aid. The social services director said Misrata is hosting 28,000 internally displaced people, nearly 7,500 of them from Sirte.⁸⁰

"We need help—we have no more food or housing to host the people fleeing the fighting," said Misrata Mayor Mohamed Eshtewi.⁸¹ The mayor said Misrata is bracing for a flood of

⁷⁷ Human Rights Watch interviews with more than 30 current or former residents, as well as officials from the Misrata government and Misrata office of the Libya Red Crescent, March 24-28, 2016.

⁷⁸ Human Rights Watch interview, Misrata, March 2016, further details withheld.

⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch interview, Misrata, March 24, 2016, further details withheld.

⁸⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with Ayad al-Shweehidi, Misrata social services director, and Saleh Abu Zareba, Misrata director of Libyan Red Crescent Misrata, March 27, 2016.

⁸¹ Human Rights Watch interview with Misrata Mayor Mohamed Eshtewi, Misrata, March 28, 2016.

new arrivals if the widely anticipated air and ground campaign begins on ISIS in Sirte. (See “ISIS in Libya,” above.)

Domestic humanitarian assistance is scarce in Libya because of fighting and the splintered government. Meanwhile most international aid organizations have pulled out of Libya because of the deteriorating security situation.⁸² A UN appeal in December for \$166 million in humanitarian aid to Libya has gone largely unfunded.⁸³ Both Libyan authorities and foreign donors should prioritize humanitarian aid to Libyans affected by the fighting.

⁸² “Libya insecurity forces aid workers to leave,” *Guardian*, August 10, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/aug/10/libya-insecurity-aid-workers-leave>.

⁸³ “Libya: \$166 million UN-backed humanitarian appeal barely one per cent funded,” *UN News Centre*, February 1, 2016, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=53143#.VzAQ3YR97IU>.

IV. International Legal Obligations

As the de-facto governing power in Sirte, ISIS is responsible under international human rights law for protecting and fulfilling without discrimination the rights of all its inhabitants, and ensuring their basic needs are met.⁸⁴ These rights include the rights to adequate food and health.⁸⁵ ISIS should immediately take all necessary steps to comply with these principles, including ending discrimination in access to essential food and medicine.

As the de facto governing power, ISIS also should respect all residents' rights to privacy and freedom of religion, movement, and expression without discrimination. Restrictions that should be removed on these grounds include the group's forced prayer, curbs on women's and girl's dress and movement, and censorship and gender-segregation of state education. ISIS should ensure that all criminal sanctions are the result of proceedings that respect due process and fair trial rights, and cease cruel, inhuman, and degrading punishments such as decapitations and floggings.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Various UN institutions and mechanisms have pressed for the applicability of international human rights standards to non-state armed groups. The UN Security Council has long called upon various non-state groups to respect human rights, particularly when they exercise significant control over territory and population. See Andrew Clapham, "Human Rights Obligations of Non-State Actors in Conflict Situations," *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 88, no. 863, September 2006, <http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng.nsf/html/review-863-p491> (accessed February 11, 2010), pp. 504-08. Clapham cites the Security Council Resolution on Angola (S/RES1213 (1998)), which is addressed both to the government of Angola and the armed group UNITA.

UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Philip Alston, has noted that while only state actors have binding legal obligations to abide by international human rights treaties, non-state actors are subject to the demands of the international community, first expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that "every organ of society respect and promote human rights." See, for example, Alston's report outlining the responsibilities of the non-state armed group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, UN Commission on Human Rights, Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Philip Alston, Mission to Sri Lanka, E/CN.4/2006/53/Add.5, March 27, 2006, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/45377b400.html> (accessed March 11, 2010), paras. 24-27.

UN field missions have also addressed human rights abuses by non-state armed groups. For instance, the human rights field operation in Nepal of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has reported on killings and other abuse by non-state armed groups. See UN Commission on Human Rights, Report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in Nepal, E/CN.4/2006/107, February 16, 2006, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/chr/docs/62chr/E.CN.4.2006.107.pdf> (accessed March 25, 2010), paras. 45-58.

⁸⁵ International instruments including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which is part of the International Bill of Human Rights, recognize the rights to adequate food and health. The ICESCR recognizes that food is an essential part of the right to an adequate standard of living (art. 11 (1)), and "the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger" (art. 11 (2)). The ICESCR is also considered the central instrument of protection for the right to health, and recognizes "the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health" (art. 12). ICESCR, entered into force January 3, 1976, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx>.

⁸⁶ Fundamental rights including the rights to life, freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, privacy, due process, and freedom of religion, movement, and expression are guaranteed under the

The conduct of ISIS in Sirte also violates international humanitarian law, or the laws of war, which applies to all sides in the armed conflict in Libya. The laws of war strictly prohibit deliberate or indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian objects.⁸⁷ Parties to a conflict must take constant care to spare the civilian population and civilian objects from the effects of hostilities.⁸⁸

The Optional Protocol to the Children's Rights Convention on Children and Armed Conflict, which Libya ratified in 2004, says that non-state armed groups should not recruit children under 18 for any purpose.⁸⁹

Serious violations of the laws of war, including summary executions of civilians or of wounded or captured fighters, or looting, confiscating or destroying civilian properties that are no longer military objectives, are war crimes when committed with criminal intent.⁹⁰ Under customary international humanitarian law and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), it is also a war crime for members of armed forces or non-state armed groups to conscript or enlist children under 15, or to use them to participate actively in hostilities.⁹¹

Another war crime (including under the Rome Statute) is "[t]he passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgement pronounced by a regularly constituted court, affording all judicial guarantees which are generally recognized as indispensable."⁹²

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, entry into force March 23, 1976, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx>.

⁸⁷ ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rule 1, citing Protocol II, art. 13(2).

⁸⁸ ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rule 15, citing Protocol I, art. 57(1).

⁸⁹ Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (A/RES/54/263 of 25 May 2000), entered into force February 12, 2002, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/OPACCRC.aspx>, art. 4.

⁹⁰ ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rule 156, Definition of War Crimes.

⁹¹ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), entered into force on 1 July 2002, https://www.icc-cpi.int/nr/rdonlyres/ea9aeff7-5752-4f84-be94-0a655eb30e16/o/rome_statute_english.pdf, art. 8.

⁹² Ibid. See also ICRC, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rule 156, Definition of War Crimes.

Certain crimes, such as murder or forced disappearance, deliberately committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, i.e. as a policy of an organized group, amount to crimes against humanity.⁹³

Those who commit, order, assist, or have command responsibility for war crimes, genocide, or crimes against humanity are subject to prosecution by domestic courts or the ICC.

Criminal responsibility for assisting such crimes—and other forms of complicity—can apply to individuals who provide financial or other support to a group that commits war crimes or crimes against humanity, especially if they have knowledge of such crimes.

⁹³ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), art. 7.

V. UN, International Role on Rights

United Nations bodies have repeatedly failed to act on their promises to identify and punish the perpetrators of serious crimes in Libya. Concerned foreign governments could also do more to hold human rights abusers in Libya to account, either by exploring possible prosecutions in their own countries or by increasing resources for further Libya investigations at the ICC.

While recourse to domestic courts is the preferred option, Libyan authorities have been unwilling or unable to investigate or prosecute those responsible for grave violations. Libya's institutions, including its judiciary, are in a state of near-collapse, and many courts have suspended their activities due to targeting of judges and prosecutors and the general deterioration in security.⁹⁴

Two UN Security Council bodies—the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team on groups including ISIS, and the Libya Panel of Experts—have the authority to conduct research on members of ISIS and others responsible for human rights abuses and grave laws-of-war violations in Libya, and to recommend that the Security Council impose sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes, against these individuals.⁹⁵

The Security Council imposed sanctions in February and April 2016 on two alleged members of ISIS and an alleged Al-Qaeda leader for acts related to Libya such as recruitment and financing.⁹⁶ However at time of writing neither the panel nor the Security

⁹⁴ Hanan Salah, Human Rights Watch, “Libya’s Justice Pandemonium,” commentary, *Jurist*, April 14, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/04/14/libyas-justice->.

⁹⁵ The Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team was created pursuant to UN Security Council resolutions 1526 (2004) and 2253 (2015) and supports the Security Council’s ISIL (Da’esh) & Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee. The Panel of Experts was established by resolution 1973 (2011) and supports the work of the Security Council’s Libya Sanctions Committee. See UN Security Council Subsidiary Organs: Libya Sanctions Committee, Work and Mandate, https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1970/panel-experts/work_mandate, and ISIL (Da’esh) & Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee, Work and Mandate, https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267#work_and_mandate.

⁹⁶ The Security Council on February 29, 2016 placed on its sanctions list Abd al-Baset Azzouz, an Al-Qaeda leader accused of participating in the deadly 2012 attack on the US Embassy in Benghazi, Libya, alleging he recruited 200 armed militants in eastern Libya in 2011, https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/abd-al-baset-azzouz.

The same day the Security Council listed Hasan al-Salahayn Salih al-Sha’ari, an ISIS member in Iraq accused of financing extremist armed militants and leading ISIS convoys in Derna in 2014,

Council had specifically identified human rights abuses or war crimes by ISIS or other armed extremist groups in Libya as reasons for sanctions.

The Security Council should prioritize such efforts while ensuring those targeted receive appropriate due process. The Security Council also should continue efforts to sanction individuals who and corporations that intentionally finance or are otherwise complicit in ISIS operations, also with appropriate due process.

In March 2014, the Security Council created a United Nations Support Mission in Libya, tasked with assisting the Libyan government with transitioning to democracy, promoting rule of law and monitoring and protecting human rights, controlling unsecured arms and related materiel in Libya, and building governance capacity.⁹⁷ The Security Council should direct the human rights unit of the mission to produce regular and public reports on the human rights situation in the country.

The United Nations Human Rights Council should prioritize appointing an independent expert or other mechanism to document serious, ongoing abuses by ISIS and all other parties in Libya, as well as the command structure of ISIS and other organizations responsible for serious crimes, with the aim of deterrence and accountability.

In March, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights called on the Human Rights Council to appoint such an independent expert.⁹⁸ The same month, Human Rights Watch and other non-governmental organizations also urged the Human Rights Council to create a dedicated investigative mechanism—which could take the form of an independent expert—on Libya.⁹⁹ Lacking political will and facing opposition from the Libya delegation,

https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/hasan-al-salahayn-salih-al-sha%E2%80%99gari.

On April 20 2016, the Security Council listed Gaza-based Husayn Juaythini, who allegedly pledged allegiance to ISIS in Syria, for “fostering connections between Gaza and Libya-based terrorists and facilitating their travel to the Syrian Arab Republic” starting in January 2015,

https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/husayn-juaythini.

In 2011, the Security Council placed dozens of members of Gaddafi’s inner-circle on its sanctions list but human rights violations were not among the reasons specified for their inclusion.

⁹⁷ See UN Support Mission in Libya, Mandate, <http://unsmil.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=3544>.

⁹⁸ Investigation by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on Libya, A/HRC/31/CRP.3, February 15, 2016, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/LY/A_HRC_31_CRP_3.pdf OHCHR report.

⁹⁹ UN Human Rights Council: Joint NGO Letter on OHCHR Report on Libya, Human Rights Watch, March 24, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/03/24/un-human-rights-council-joint-ngo-letter-ohchr-report-libya>.

however, the Human Rights Council stopped short of doing so during its session that month.

Concerned foreign governments should increase resources and efforts to investigate and prosecute serious crimes in or related to Libya, either by providing additional resources to the ICC or when feasible through their domestic judicial systems.

The ICC has jurisdiction over war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide committed in Libya since February 15, 2011, under UN Security Council resolution 1970.¹⁰⁰ The ICC prosecutor is mainly funded by contributions from member countries. The prosecutor has expressed a commitment to pursuing further probes in Libya but cited funding constraints amid increasing demands.¹⁰¹ Member states should ensure the court's prosecutor has sufficient resources to pursue an investigation into ongoing serious crimes by all sides in Libya.¹⁰²

Certain categories of the most serious crimes that violate international law, such as war crimes, are subject to “universal jurisdiction”—permitting a country's domestic judicial system to investigate and prosecute certain crimes, regardless of whether they were committed on that country's territory, by one of its nationals or against one of its nationals.¹⁰³ Whether cases under universal jurisdiction can be pursued in a particular country depends on its domestic laws.

Foreign governments providing direct support to military operations by any armed party in Libya, such as information on targets or material support, may be parties to the armed conflict and bound to apply the laws of war, including the obligation to investigate alleged

¹⁰⁰ UN Security Council Resolution 1970, S/Res/1970 (2011), adopted February 26, 2011, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/NR/rdonlyres/081A9013-B03D-4859-9D61-5D0B0F2F5EFA/0/1970Eng.pdf>.

¹⁰¹ Statement of the Prosecutor of the ICC to the United Nations Security Council on the Situation in Libya, May 12, 2015, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/Pages/item.aspx?name=otp-stat-12-05-2015>.

¹⁰² Human Rights Watch, “Libya: New ICC investigation needed amid crisis,” press release, May 11, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/05/11/libya-new-icc-investigation-needed-amid-crisis>.

¹⁰³ International treaties that oblige states parties to use universal jurisdiction include: the 1949 Geneva Conventions, the 1973 Convention against Apartheid, the 1984 Convention against Torture, and the 2006 Convention against Enforced Disappearance (not yet in force). It is also generally agreed that international customary law allows the use of universal jurisdiction with regard to crimes considered particularly heinous by the international community, such as crimes against humanity and genocide.

violations. Human Rights Watch urges foreign governments implicated in the conflict to carry out such investigations.

Continued failure to seek an end impunity for serious human rights abuses and war crimes in Libya is likely to result in more horrific crimes and more civilian victims, including by ISIS.

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“We Feel We Are Cursed”

Life under ISIS in Sirte, Libya

In February 2015 the extremist armed group Islamic State (also known as ISIS) began taking over the Mediterranean port city of Sirte, Libya. By the following August ISIS had turned Sirte into its largest stronghold outside of Iraq and Syria. This report documents serious crimes committed by ISIS in Sirte including the executions of 49 people the group accused of “spying,” “sorcery,” and “insulting God.”

“We Feel We Are Cursed,” based on research including interviews with 45 Libyans who lived under ISIS in Sirte, details how the group imposed its severe interpretation of Sharia (Islamic law) on all aspects of life. Meanwhile, ISIS has failed to provide basic necessities to the local population, diverting food, medicine, fuel, and cash, along with homes of residents who fled, to its fighters and functionaries.

With war-racked Libya’s institutions in near-collapse, countries able to exercise criminal jurisdiction should take immediate steps to apprehend and prosecute those responsible for atrocities by ISIS and other parties. The International Criminal Court should prioritize an investigation of ongoing serious crimes in Libya as well.

The United Nations Human Rights Council should appoint an independent expert to document serious, ongoing abuses in Libya. The Security Council should impose sanctions on those found responsible for serious crimes in Libya while ensuring appropriate due process.

International parties have repeatedly failed to act on their promises to identify and punish the perpetrators of serious crimes in Libya. Continued failure to act will result in more horrific crimes by groups including ISIS.



An ISIS official makes an announcement ahead of the execution of two men for “sorcery” in Sirte, Libya. Image from a 2015 Islamic State (ISIS) video. The online clearinghouse Jihadology.net posted the video on its website.