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Islamic State (IS) has experienced fits and starts in its efforts to expand beyond Syria and Iraq. As IS has tried to gain a foothold in new countries, it has encountered violent opposition from both state and non-state actors. In Algeria, state security forces decapitated IS's nascent wilayat (province), which suffered tremendous losses in a series of military operations in May 2015. In several other theaters, including Afghanistan, Somalia, and the Sahel, IS has run up against more powerful jihadist groups, which have aggressively targeted IS supporters. Libya, however, stands out as one of the group's few successes.

The Libyan civil conflict has created a political and security vacuum that IS has exploited, carving out strongholds in weakly governed areas such as Sirte and thereby further fueling instability. Its Syria and Iraq-based leadership (hereafter, IS Central) recognized the potential for growth in Libya early on and poured considerable resources into its Libyan wilayat, dispatching high-level officials to Sirte to manage the group's expansion and eventually redirecting hundreds of foreign fighters from Syria to Libya.

In turn, Sirte has become a hub for the group's North African operations. IS Central's interest in Sirte underscores the city's growing strategic value to the organization, and illustrates the group's ambitious plans for its Libyan wilayat.

Sending in the Cavalry

In the spring of 2014, several hundred members of the al-Battar Brigade, a Libyan-led military unit based in Syria that pledged allegiance to IS, returned to the eastern Libyan city of Derna. There they established the Islamic Youth Shura Council, a jihadist group that quickly revealed its pro-IS sympathies. Though it is possible the al-Battar members returned of their own volition, it is more likely that IS Central dispatched these militants back to Libya with orders to establish an IS satellite in the country. Subsequently, in September 2014, IS Central sent two foreign officials—a Saudi and a Yemeni—to Derna to receive pledges of allegiance from Libyan IS supporters (al-Hayat, November 3, 2014).

At around the same time, IS Central appointed Abu Nabil al-Anbari, a former Baathist who spent time in a U.S. prison in Iraq before rising through the IS ranks, to lead the group's operations in Libya. The appointment of a senior Iraqi to command IS in Libya is an indication that IS Central intends to oversee the group's expansion there, since it has had few qualms appointing locals elsewhere; the IS wilayats in Algeria, Afghanistan, and the Sinai Peninsula, for instance, have all been commanded by local militants.

To consolidate its territorial holdings in Sirte, IS Central has doubled down on its support for its Libyan affiliate, sending several high-ranking officials to direct operations in the country. Intelligence officials from the Libyan city of Misrata, which has been the target of multiple IS attacks, assert that IS Central sent a high-profile Iraqi official known only as Abu Omar alongside another Iraqi official from the city of Tikrit to Sirte in October 2015 to manage IS operations in the city. Upon arriving in Sirte, the Iraqi officials established both a sharia court and a taxation system in the city, suggesting that IS is looking to fully export its governance model from Iraq and Syria to Libya (DW, December 18, 2015).

Two prominent IS commanders followed Abu Omar to Libya; Abu Ali al-Anbari, one of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's top lieutenants, traveled to Libya by boat in early November 2015, according to multiple news outlets (al-Wasat Facebook page, November 10, 2015), while Abu Omar al-Shishani, IS's most prominent field commander, was also reportedly in Libya in February 2016 (Libya Prospect, February 12, 2016). If true, al-Shishani presumably spent little time there before returning to Syria, where he is thought to have been fatally wounded in a U.S. airstrike. Meanwhile, Turki al-Binali, one of IS's most influential religious clerics, is rumored to have been in Libya in 2015, as well (al-Wasat, December 13, 2015).

The fact that IS dispatched al-Anbari, al-Binali, and al-Shishani to Libya reflects IS's commitment to its Libyan affiliate, and bolsters predictions that IS is preparing Libya as a fall-back option in the event the group loses further ground in Syria and Iraq.

Command and Control

With high-level IS officials moving in and out of Libya, Sirte has become a central hub within the IS Africa network.

The relationship between IS wilayats outside of Syria and Iraq remains difficult to define, but it appears that the Libyan wilayat has developed links with several IS wilayats operating in Africa, and may even be directing some of their activities. Sirte's relationship with Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiya-the Nigeria-based militant group commonly known as Boko Haram-provides an instructive example of the Libyan wilayat's African connections. According to Jacob Zenn, a Jamestown Foundation analyst who studies jihadist groups in Africa, approximately 80-200 Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiya members have traveled to Sirte to join IS (CTC Sentinel, August 21, 2015). Moreover, a well-connected Nigerian blogger alleged that Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiya is now being led by a Libyan militant who had helped to facilitate the Nigerian group's pledge of allegiance to IS in March 2015 (Fulan's Sitrep, August 5, 2015). A former Nigerian militant similarly claimed that Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiya now answers to IS commanders in Libya. [1]

IS officials in Sirte may also be directing the activities of Wilayat Sinai, the group formerly known as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis. In February 2016, a security official in North Sinai told an Egyptian newspaper that he had intercepted phone calls between Wilayat Sinai militants that indicated that Wilayat Sinai was receiving instructions from Libya-based officials (al-Watan, February 9, 2016). It has not been possible to verify the accuracy of this claim, but it would not be surprising if IS's Libyan wilayat had assumed command responsibilities for other IS operations in Africa, considering the direct links between IS Central and Libya.

Influx of Foreign Fighters

As IS has gained strength in Libya, the country has gone from being an exporter of foreign fighters to a destination for them, with IS Central playing a pivotal role in promoting migration [hijrah] to Libya and directing foreign fighter flows into the country. Libya had long served as a staging and training ground for foreign fighters heading to Syria, but in December 2014, IS Central reportedly instructed its Libyan wilayat to stop sending fighters to Syria and instead to focus on operations inside the country (Al-Jazeera, February 5, 2016). Shortly after, IS propagandists began encouraging foreign fighters from the surrounding region to move to Libya.

In December 2014, IS online supporters published an article highlighting the group's expansion in Libya, and providing basic instructions on traveling to IS strongholds in the country (Justpaste.it, December 15, 2014). In March 2015, IS released the eighth issue of Dabiq, its English-language online magazine, which featured an article on IS in Libya and noted that the country had "become an ideal land of hijrah for those who find difficulty making their way to Shām [Syria] particularly those of our brothers and sisters in Africa" (Dabiq, March 31, 2015). Subsequently, in April 2015, the media outlet for Wilayat Tarabulus (the official name for IS in Sirte and central Libya) released a video, entitled "Message to our Brothers in Tunisia," that called upon Tunisians to join IS forces in Libya (Jihadology, April 7, 2015). The message indicates the group's primary objective in North Africa, at least at that time, was consolidating support in Libya, rather than expanding into Tunisia.

With IS urging migration to Libya and gaining ground in Sirte, foreign fighters from across the world have flooded into the country. In the summer of 2015, three British women arrived in Sirte and began issuing calls on social media for fellow Britons to join them, explaining that it was easier to travel to Libya than to Syria (Twitter, June 2015). A small number of French foreign fighters have also joined IS in Sirte (RTL, March 3 2016). Meanwhile, Libya has become a central hub for foreign fighters from across Africa. Tunisians likely make up the largest contingent of IS foreign fighters in Libya-one estimate put the number of Tunisian foreign fighters in Libya at between 1,000 and 1,500 (UN Working Group, July 2015). Fighters from as far afield as Kenya and Senegal have also traveled, or attempted to travel, to Libya to fight with IS. [2] [3]

In January 2016, U.S. intelligence officials assessed that-throughout the latter part of 2015-IS Central had sent several hundred foreign fighters originally destined for Syria to Libya (New York Times, January 18, 2016). This revelation was remarkable, especially considering that IS Central's decision to redeploy fighters to Libya came at a time when

the group was facing mounting military pressure in Syria and Iraq, and further demonstrated Libya's strategic importance to IS's caliphate project.

The foreign fighters who have poured into Libya now comprise a significant contingent of IS forces in the country. According to a Misratan intelligence official, approximately 70% of IS fighters in Sirte are foreigners (CTC Sentinel, March 17, 2016). Though this estimate is almost certainly too high, it reflects outside perceptions about foreign fighters' disproportionate representation within IS's Libyan operations.

Obstacles to IS in Libya

With foreign fighters streaming into Sirte and IS Central devoting significant resources to the group's operations there, the international community is understandably concerned about IS expansion in Libya. But several obstacles stand in the way of the group's future growth.

Libya lacks the sectarian tensions that IS has exploited to mobilize Sunni populations in Syria and Iraq, and as a consequence, IS must depend on foreign fighters, alongside a hardened core of Libyan militants. This has done little to help it win over the local population, which has rebelled against it in both Sirte and in Derna. In the latter, rival jihadist factions, supported by local residents, forced IS fighters to withdraw entirely in June 2015. [4]

IS is also less powerful than it purports to be in Libya. Even though foreigners have significantly boosted its ranks in the country-recent estimates suggest that there are between 3,000 and 6,500 IS militants in Libya-other armed actors in Libya, including the now-fragmented Libya Dawn coalition and its rival, the Libyan National Army, are far larger and better-equipped.

Further, if a political accord is reached, a unity government would be able to draw upon resources from the international community to fight IS. However, a sustainable political settlement in Libya still appears to be a long way off, and any unity government that is established will struggle to rein in Libya's patchwork of armed factions. Indeed, as long as Libya remains politically fragmented, IS will continue to thrive and expand.

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Notes

1. Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram and the Islamist Insurgency in West Africa," Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Terrorism, Non-Proliferation, and Trade Subcommittee, February 24, 2016, https://gallery.mailchimp.com/28b6673fcc2022a1dd557acae/files/Jacob_Zenn_Written_Testimony_Feb_24_2016.pdf.
2. In March 2016, Kenyan officials arrested four individuals trying to travel through Sudan to Libya. See Cyrus Ombati, "Police Arrest 4 Terror Suspects at Busia Headed for Libya to Join ISIS," Standard Media, March 6, 2016, <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000194048/police-arrest-4-terror-suspects-at-busia-headed-for-libya-to-join-isis>.
3. At least a dozen Senegalese fighters are believed to be in Sirte. See "Who Are the Senegalese Men Joining the Islamic State Group?" France 24, February 1, 2016, <http://observers.france24.com/en/20160201-senegal-jihadist-islamic-state>.
4. For more on local uprisings against IS in Libya, see Nathaniel Barr, "The Islamic State's Uneven Trajectory in Libya," Terrorism Monitor 13:19 (September 17, 2015).

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