The Islamic State in Libya: Challenge and Response

Shaul Shay and Av Baras

The national uprisings in the Middle East and Africa that began in late 2010 did not bypass Libya; by early 2011 the Libyan regime had collapsed on the heels of a civilian revolt. Muammar Qaddafi, Libya's long-time leader, was caught and executed by the rebels in October 2011.[1] The governing vacuum created by the downfall of Qaddafi's regime led to violent struggles between armed militias and the Libyan army, particularly around Benghazi and Tripoli. In the democratic elections held in July 2012, representatives of the armed militias did poorly as compared to the secular leadership identified with the Libyan military. This led to even more fighting and chaotic governance, and cast the nation in a downward spiral.[2]

A new election was held in July 2014. The secular government won once again,[3] but the results were contested by the Islamists.[4] In August 2014, Islamic militias, united under the banner of Fajr Libya (Libyan Dawn), took Tripoli, forcing the parliament to move the seat of government to Tobruk on Libya's east coast. At the same time the Islamic militias also seized cities in eastern Libya. As a result, two different governments, parliaments, and militaries are currently in place. The state in Tobruk and Bayda is secular, has a parliament, and is recognized by the UN; the second entity, concentrated in Tripoli, is ruled by a government and parliament of an Islamic bent. The power struggle between the two rivals and the consequent chaos in the nation has enabled the Islamic State to seize control of certain areas, including Derna and Sirte on the Mediterranean coast.

Libya is important to the Islamic State for several reasons. First, like Syria and Iraq, it is a failed state with no effective central government or organized army capable of resisting the forces of the Islamic State and impeding their

progress. Second, Libya sits at a critical geographical crossroads that allows terrorist movement throughout the Maghreb and the Sahel – areas perceived by the Islamic State as natural extensions of its caliphate. Third, Libya is a strategic location with quick and relatively easy access to Europe across the Mediterranean. The Islamic State can thus use the masses of refugees fleeing the country as a cover for exporting its activists and ideology to European shores. Fourth, Libya is rich in oil and gas, resources that can help finance Islamic State activities if it is able to seize control of them. And finally, the enormous munitions stores left behind by Qaddafi's regime are of inestimable value to the Islamic State, which can distribute these weapons not only to its operatives in Libya but also to those in other areas of the African continent and beyond.[5]

The Islamic State's presence in Libya was first exposed in October 2014 via a video clip that introduced several fighters who had joined the Young Muslims Shura Council, an organization that has sworn an oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State. According to most reports, by the summer of 2015 the organization had several thousand fighters at its disposal in Libya. Many of these had served in other outfits before switching their loyalty to the Islamic State, while a relatively smaller number were Islamic State activists who had returned from the battlefields in Syria and Iraq.

The Battle over Derna

Until the spring of 2014, Derna, located in eastern Libya, was controlled by Ansar al-Shariah, an Islamic militia historically associated with al-Qaeda. However, during the protracted fighting in Libya, the group split both ideologically and geographically, with one faction occupying Benghazi, the other Derna. Significantly, this development reflects the consequences of the April 2013 rift between al-Qaeda in Syria, led by Abu Muhammad al-Julani, and al-Qaeda in Iraq, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[6] Ansar al-Shariah in Benghazi continued to identify with al-Qaeda, while Ansar al-Shariah in Derna aligned itself with al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State.[7]

In the spring of 2014, a group of Islamic activists arrived in Derna, among them people who had fought in Syria and Iraq with the Islamic State. The group's announcement that it was founding an organization called the Young Muslims Shura Council led to battles for control of the city between those who supported the Islamic State and those who favored Salafist organizations

such as the Derna Shura Council and the Abu Salim Brigades. The fighting continued until September 2014, when a large contingent of Islamic State activists arrived from Syria and won control of the city for the Islamic State.[8] Approximately one month later, the heads of the Ansar al-Shariah group in Derna swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi.[9] Derna was consequently declared a city controlled by the Islamic caliphate, in fact, the first outside of Syria or Iraq to be annexed to it.[10]

Beyond their pledge of allegiance, the Islamic State activists in Derna announced the establishment of an emirate, subdivided into three districts. This move was endorsed by the caliph, who called on all his supporters in Libya to join the Islamic State. In January 2015, al-Baghdadi announced three new provinces of the Islamic caliphate: Wilayat Tarabulus (Tripoli) in Libya's northwest, Wilayat Barqa (which included the major cities of Derna and Benghazi) in the country's northeast, and Wilayat Fazzan in the country's south.[11] While Wilayat Fazzan has been relatively peaceful and quiet, the other two provinces have witnessed several terrorist attacks and violent incidents, such as the execution of 21 Egyptian Copts in February 2015,[12] and a suicide attack involving three car bombs that led to 47 civilian deaths in al-Qubbah in March 2015.[13] In June 2015, the Islamic State in Derna made a move that cost it control over the city and the emirate it had established. Immediately after Islamic State supporters assassinated two opposition leaders, battles broke out between the sides. Fearing the spread of combat westwards, the army deployed its forces. During the first days of fighting, the organizations opposed to the Islamic State managed to oust its fighters from the center of Derna to an eastern suburb,[14] thereby bringing Islamic State control of the city to an end.

The Seizure of Sirte

In August 2015, the mufti of the Islamic State in Sirte, a city on the Mediterranean coast between Tripoli and Benghazi, announced the establishment of a new emirate[15] under the aegis of the caliphate as a replacement for the one lost in Derna. The announcement followed the total conquest of the city, most of which had already been taken in June 2015. Islamic State fighters invaded Sirte, repelled the militias still loyal to the government and parliament in Tripoli, and seized control of government buildings.[16] The fighters also occupied the Ghardabiya air base south of the city, a site that the Libyans still viewed as a strategic stronghold though it

was all but razed to the ground by the NATO bombing of the Qaddafi regime in 2011. In the course of the takeover, hundreds of civilians in Sirte, mostly Salafist clerics who refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the Islamic State, were slaughtered.[17]

While the Libyan army chose not to intervene except through pinpoint airstrikes,[18] the militias headed by Fajr Libya and loyal to the Islamic parliament in Tripoli tried to move against the Islamic State, but to no avail.[19] Following its successes in Sirte, the Islamic State expanded its activities and tried to seize control of Misurata, Libya's third largest city.[20] The Islamic State conquest of Sirte, like its occupation of other strongholds in Libya, was accomplished with help from Salafist jihadists from other countries. The Nigerian Boko Haram, for example, sent hundreds of operatives to help the Islamic State in Libya.[21]

Regional Influences

The entrenchment of the Islamic State has not only affected Libya's internal affairs, but also caused reverberations in neighboring regions. For example, Egypt, which shares a border with Libya, is now forced to confront the Islamic State threat on two fronts – first, with respect to the damage that it has wrought on Egyptian citizens and interests in Libya (as in the case of Derna), and second, with respect to the terrorists infiltrating Egypt from Libya as well as the large scale smuggling of arms. These challenges join Egypt's bitter war against Ansar Bait al-Maqdis, an organization active mostly in the Sinai Peninsula, which took an oath of allegiance to the Islamic State already in November 2014 and announced the establishment of Wilayat Sinai, a new Islamic State province.[22] In light of these threats, Egypt has beefed up its forces along the Libyan border as well as its navy in the region. Its air force also bombed Islamic State targets in Libya after the murder of the Copts in Derna.

Tunisia too is affected by the Islamic State's presence in Libya. In this case, the danger is real and immediate, as hundreds of Tunisian volunteers are making their way home from Libya.[23] These activists undergo training in camps in western Libya, whence they continue to their various destinations, be they Syria, Iraq, Libya, or Tunisia.[24] Since 2013, an active group of Salafist jihadists has been calling itself the Uqba Ibn Nafi Brigade and operating against Tunisia's security forces along the country's border with Libya. In the past it was thought that the group identified with al-Qaeda of the Islamic

Maghreb, an extension of North Africa's "official" al-Qaeda, but in late 2014 it became known that the group's leadership had sworn allegiance to Caliph al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State. Two terrorist attacks took place in Tunisia in 2015, both targeting tourists. The first, in March 2015, at the Bardo National Museum in the capital city, killed 18;[25] the second, in the resort town of Sousse on the Mediterranean coast, took the lives of 38 vacationers, 30 of them British citizens.[26] Both acts were conducted by terrorists who had arrived from Libya, where they had been trained in camps before returning to Tunisia to launch the attacks.[27]

Another concern – to many Westerners in particular – regarding the Islamic State in Libya is the country's proximity to Europe.[28] The Islamic State not only recruits operatives in Europe to join its ranks in the Middle East and Africa, but also sends operatives into Europe. According to one Libyan source, the Islamic State allows immigrant smugglers to operate freely in the country in exchange for half their profits, and also exploits this route and has activists disguised as refugees infiltrate Europe.[29] The presence of the Islamic State in Libya thus undermines the stability of neighboring countries and represents a twofold danger to Europe. First, it encourages the flow of refugees in order to apply pressure on European countries, most of which are helping the US-led coalition against it. Second, its activists enter Europe purporting to be among the waves of refugees entering the continent. In this way it can establish terrorist infrastructures to use against European targets.

Conclusions

Four years after the ouster of Qaddafi, Libya remains a failed state without a functioning central government and subject to the throes of civil war. Two armed militias supporting two rival governments – a result of the last election – are fighting one another, instead of joining forces to defeat the Islamic State. Libya thus lacks a central government capable of stopping the entity's spread or even collaborating with the West's military initiatives against it. This reality poses a growing threat to Libya's neighbors – Egypt and Tunisia – as well as a substantive danger to Europe.

In Libya, the campaign against the Islamic State must take the form of a comprehensive war on all geographical fronts with the coordination of all nations involved. Militarily, the coalition's activities against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria must be extended to Libya through airstrikes and naval

blockades in order to stop the movement of Islamic State fighters and arms to and from the country. In addition, the Egyptian initiative to establish an Arab League military force to confront the Islamic State in Libya (modeled on the force against the Houthis in Yemen) must be implemented. Finally, illegal immigration into Europe must be more closely monitored with mechanisms designed to check and identify Islamic State activists trying to enter the continent under the guise of refugees and asylum seekers.

Given today's reality, it is clear that Libya and Tunisia are incapable of dealing effectively with the spread of the Islamic State on their soil. Egypt is engaged in a harsh struggle with the Islamic State's branch in Sinai and elsewhere within its country and is therefore unwilling to open another front on the Libyan border without external help. On November 14, 2015, a US airstrike in Derna is believed to have killed Iraqi national Abu Nabil, one of the top Islamic State commanders in Libya. The strike was the first US raid against an Islamic State leader in Libya, and it is not clear yet if it represents a change in US policy and greater American involvement in fighting the Islamic State in Libya.[30]

At present, the Islamic State in the region is still limited in power and influence, but if the West and/or the Arab League nations do not intervene militarily in the near future, the Islamic State will be able to be further entrenched and pose a serious threat that its opponents will find difficult to confront. They therefore need to act accordingly, and the sooner the better.

Notes

1 "Muammar Gaddafi Killed, Captured In Sirte," *World Post*, October 20, 2011.
2 Daniel Wigmore-Shepherd, "The Trend of Increasing Violence in Post-Gaddafi Libya," *ACLED*, August 6, 2014, http://goo.gl/IUcosb.
3 Cameron Glenn, "Libya's Islamists: Who They Are – And What They Want," Wilson Center, https://goo.gl/tBB9Ws.
4 Sasha Toperich, "Libya: New Parliament Set to Be Inaugurated in Tobruk," *World Post*, August 1, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sasha-toperich/libya-new-parliament-set-_b_5640899.html.
5 Charlie Winter, "Libya: The Strategic Gateway for the Islamic State," February 2015, Quilliam Foundation, http://goo.gl/ZxBE6D.
6 "Qaeda in Iraq Confirms Syria's Nusra is Part of Network," *Global Post*, April 9, 2013, http:/goo.gl/3Kwumi.
7 "War in Libya and its Futures: State of Play – Islamist Forces (2)," The Red (Team) Analysis Society, February 26, 2015, http://goo.gl/0kGDbi.

8 Maggie Michael, "How a Libyan City Joined the Islamic State Group," *AP*, November 9, 2014, http://bigstory.ap.org/article/195a7ffb0090444785eb814a5bda28c7/how-libyan-city-joined-islamic-state-group.
9 "Groups Pledge Allegiance to ISIS in Eastern Libya," *Vocativ*, October 5, 2014, http://www.vocativ.com/world/isis-2/isis-libya-parade/.
10 Michael, "How a Libyan City Joined the Islamic State Group."
11 Paul Cruickshank, Nic Robertson, Tim Lister, and Jomana Karadsheh, "ISIS Comes to Libya," *CNN*, http://edition.cnn.com/2014/11/18/world/isis-libya/.
12 "Egypt Eyes Revenge After ISIS Executes 21 Copts, Releases Video," *RT*, February 15, 2015, http://www.rt.com/news/232583-isis-video-execution-egyptians/.
13 "Triple Suicide Blasts Kill 47 in Libya's Qubbah," *Anadolu Agency*, February 20, 2015, http://www.aa.com.tr/en/headline/468248--20-killed-as-suicide-bombings-rock-libyas-qubbah.
14 "Libya: Shura Council Captures the Leader of the Islamic State in Derna and Allied with the Population," *France 24*, June 14, 2015, http://goo.gl/0gi9FL.
15 "The Organization of the Islamic State Declares Sirte Islamic Emirate as Belonging to the Ruler al-Baghdadi," *France 24*, August 29, 2015, http://goo.gl/ZbjV2J.
16 "ISIS Seizes Another Town in Libya," *al-Arabiya*, June 5, 2015, http://goo.gl/pxurv5.
17 "ISIS Victims in Sirte Exceed 169 Dead," *Sky News Arabia*, August 14, 2015, http://goo.gl/Xh5E4O.
18 "IS Kills Dozens in Libya's Sirte, Putting Down Uprising by Local Tribe," *Middle East Eye*, August 14, 2015, http://goo.gl/M212Nv.
19 "ISIS 'Beheads' 12 in Battle for Libya's Sirte: Media," *Daily Star*, August 15, 2015, http://goo.gl/MDcB3N.
20 Suliman Ali Zway and David D. Kirkpatrick, "Western Officials Alarmed as ISIS Expands Territory in Libya," May 31, 2015, *New York Times*, http://goo.gl/X65Nrz.
21 "Boko Haram Strengthens Ties with ISIS," *New York Post*, August 22, 2015, http://nypost.com/2015/08/22/boko-haram-strengthens-ties-with-isis.
22 Jon Lee Anderson, "Egypt, Libya, and ISIS," *New Yorker,* February 17, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/egypt-libya-isis.
23 "Libya a 'Magnet' for Jihadists from Tunisia and Beyond," *News 24*, July 4, 2015, http://goo.gl/BU9r0C.
24 Jack Moore, "5,000 Foreign Fighters Flock to Libya as ISIS Call for Jihadists," March 3, 2015, *Newsweek*, http://www.newsweek.com/5000-foreign-fighters-flock-libya-isis-call-jihadists-310948.
25 A. Khelifa and Katharina Wecker, "Accomplices Sought in Tunisia Terror Attack," *USA Today*, March 18, 2015, http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/03/18/reports-shots-tunisia-parliament/24948295/.
26 Sam Webb, "Tunisia Attack: Latest Updates as Massacre British Death Toll May Rise Past 30," *Mirror*, June 29, 2015, http://goo.gl/0I0zO4.

27 "Tunisia Hotel Attack: Authorities Search for Libya-Trained Suspects," *Irish Times*, July 2, 2015, http://goo.gl/WtXKqy.
28 "The Second Front: ISIS Gaining Strength in North Africa," *NRG*, February 17, 2015.
29 "Worrisome: ISIS Fighters Entering Europe," *Israel Hayom*, May 17, 2015.
30 Jay Akbar, "ISIS Leader 'Killed' in American Airstrike in Libya while Paris Terror Attacks were Underway," *Mail Online*, November 14, 2015.