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IS Defeat in Sirte Leaves Tunisia Vulnerable

Following Islamic State's defeat in Sirte, the group's militants will likely scatter within Libya, as well as to neighboring countries. Tunisia will be especially at risk.

By Lisa Watanabe

The imminent defeat of Islamic State (IS) in Sirte is being hailed as a major step towards downgrading IS presence in Libya. Yet, the liberation of Sirte will neither spell the end of IS in Libya nor its ambitions in North Africa. Its members will most likely regroup in smaller cells in Libya and neighboring states. Tunisia, whose fragile transition offers hope for democracy in the region, would be especially at risk as a result of this scattering. IS Libya has been focused on Tunisia and the bulk of its members are Tunisian. The Tunisian government fears that many IS militants fleeing Libya will return home, compounding the country's already sizable problem with violent extremism. Tunisia could struggle to cope with the potential fallout from degrading IS capabilities in Libya. In the absence of a functioning government in Libya and sufficient regional cooperation, Tunisia will need sustained international assistance.

IS Libya after Sirte

Armed groups allied with the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya, and assisted by US airstrikes, now stand poised to flush out several hundred remaining IS fighters from the central coastal city of Sirte. Since May 2015, Sirte had been the group's base in Libya, conceived along the lines of a capital similar to Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq.

Establishing an enclave in Libya appears to have been a strategic move by IS; Libya is an ideal location from which to facilitate the group's expansion in North and sub-Saharan Africa. In early

2014, members of the Battar Brigade, comprised of Libyans fighting in Syria, returned home and set up Majlis Shura Shabaab al-Islam (MSSI) in the eastern city of Derna. Senior militants from IS in Syria were sent to Libya to help them establish a Libyan IS governorate, which became a reality in October that year when MSSI declared itself "Wilayet Derna" of Islamic State.¹

The group suffered an initial setback when it was driven out of Derna in June 2015 by the local Al-Qaeda-linked Mujahedeen Shura Council of Derna. It managed to rebound and move with relative ease into Muammar

KEY POINTS

- The anticipated defeat of IS in Sirte will not spell the end of IS in Libya or its North African ambitions, as IS militants will likely regroup in smaller cells in Libya and neighboring countries.
- The marked Tunisian profile of IS Libya and the group's focus thus far on Tunisia indicate that the country could be particularly at risk.
- Tunisian authorities are still struggling to develop a coherent response to burgeoning domestic extremism and its linkage to instability in Libya.
- In the absence of a functioning government in Libya and adequate regional cooperation, Tunisia will need sustained international support.
- International partners should not only focus on training and equipping, but also on improving security governance and regional cooperation in the Maghreb.

Qaddafi's hometown of Sirte, just west of Libya's "oil crescent." Before the recent offensive to recapture Sirte, IS controlled over 200 kilometers of the coast east of Sirte and had launched several attacks near key oil terminals, raising the prospect of substantial parts of Libya's oil infrastructure falling to the group.

The defeat of IS in Sirte will undoubtedly be a blow to the group. However, IS will not disappear from Libya. In addition to holding territory, IS Libya has been operating through a cellular structure. It has a presence in Benghazi, the country's second largest city, where it has formed alliances of convenience with armed groups clashing with Libya's rogue General Haftar, who refuses to recognize the GNA. A number of IS cells are also known to exist in other cities across the country, including Tripoli, Sabratha, near the border with Tunisia, Bani Walid, in the northwest, the Jufra district in centre of the country, as well as the Kufra district in the southeast.²

IS militants fleeing Sirte appear to be moving south to the region of Fezzan, where they will likely encounter limited resistance and could exploit discontent among tribes that were loyal to Qaddafi, in much the same way as they did in Sirte. Though IS is not as well established as other violent extremist groups in Fezzan, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), it has already established working relationships with local militias in the Kufra district to protect its convoys and supply lines from Sudan and Egypt.

Besides dispersing within Libya, IS could also regroup in Libya's neighbors. Tunisia's defence minister, Farhat Hachani, stated in September 2016 that IS militants are not only fleeing south of Libya to join Boko Haram; they are also moving west.³ Thus far, Tunisia has been a privileged target of IS in Libya. Additional high profile attacks in Tunisia could boost the group's standing following its defeat in Sirte.

IS Libya's Tunisian Connection

Tunisian foreign fighters form one of IS' largest contingents in Libya. Some estimates suggest that between 1,000 and 1,500 Tunisian foreign fighters have joined IS Libya. The 2015 attacks on the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli and on Tripoli's airport were carried out by Tunisian IS militants.⁴ Tunisians have not only served as suicide bombers; they have also taken on command roles, including at the helm of IS in Sirte.

IS Libya has not only had a marked Tunisian profile, it has also had a conspicuous Tunisian focus. Some of the most serious attacks in Tunisia in 2015 and 2016 have either been linked to indi-

viduals who trained in Libya or Tunisian foreign fighters operating out of Libya. The assailants involved in the Bardo Museum attack in Tunis on 18 March 2015, which killed 20 people, and the beach resort attack in Sousse on 26 June 2015, which left 40 people dead, are believed to have undergone training in Sabratha in northwestern Libya, near the Tunisian border.

An IS cell located near Sabratha is focused on carrying out attacks in Tunisia. On 7 March 2016, its members attacked army and police posts in the town of Ben Guerdane, on the southeastern edge of Tunisia, close to the border with Libya, killing 50 people, including civilians. The cell appears to have been overwhelmingly comprised of Tunisian nationals, who are believed to have coordinated the attack with sleeper cells in Ben Guerdane.

The assault on Ben Guerdane raised questions about IS Libya's aims with regards to Tunisia, as well as Tunisia's capacity to cope with a spillover of violent extremism from its troubled neighbour. Tunisian security forces succeeded in defending the border town on this occasion. Yet, the attacks demonstrated that IS Libya can already call upon a number of sleeper cells in Tunisia to orchestrate high profile attacks.

Tunisia's Jihadi Threat

An increased focus on Tunisia, facilitated by returning foreign fighters, would not only fan the flames of a steadily mounting extremist challenge in Tunisia; it would also augment its IS character. Following the fall of Ben Ali in

FURTHER READING

Countering the Islamic State in Libya *Christopher S. Chivvis, Survival* 58:4, 2016, pp. 113–130

Since 2014, IS has been developing a presence in Libya. Christopher Chivvis' article provides a good overview of the rise of IS in Libya and delineates what a successful campaign against it would entail.

Defeating the Islamic State in Sirte: Secondary Effects and Remaining Challenges *Andrew Engel, The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, Policy Watch* 2650, 8 July 2016

How IS in Libya may evolve following its defeat in Sirte is now a vital policy concern. In this short piece, Andrew Engel outlines how the group is likely to adapt to the loss of its Libyan capital.

Jihadist Violence in Tunisia: The Urgent Need for a National Strategy *International Crisis Group, Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Briefing No. 50, 22 June 2016*

Despite the growing jihadi threat in Tunisia, Tunisian authorities have been slow to put in place measures to address it. In this report, the International Crisis Group discusses the key impediments to developing a coherent response.

2011, the sudden granting of religious freedoms, the release of Islamist extremists from prison, and a ground swell of frustrated youth contributed to the rise of predominantly non-violent Salafism in the country. The largest Salafist group created at that time was Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST), which had initially refrained from calling for domestic jihad, focusing instead on proselytization.

Many Salafis who wished to engage in jihad travelled to Syria and later Iraq. By 2013, some 2,000 Tunisians were believed to have travelled to Syria, primarily to join IS. Just two years later, more than 3,000 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq were believed to be Tunisian citizens, making Tunisians the largest group of foreign fighters in the region. Inevitably, some of these fighters made their way back home – 400 battle-hardened Tunisian foreign fighters were reported to have returned by late 2015 – raising fears that they could engage in terrorist activities on Tunisian soil.⁵ Some are believed to have joined IS in Libya.⁶

Domestic jihad had also been embraced by AST by this time as a result of a government crackdown on the organization following the murder of two politicians in 2013, both of which the government blamed on AST. Since its outlawing, AST members have gone underground and the organization has fragmented. A number of AST militants have fled to other countries, including Libya, where some joined IS. Others have stayed in Tunisia and joined groups such as Uqba ibn Nafi, an AQIM-affiliated group that is engaged in an insurgency in the Mount Chaambi region, near the Algerian border. Others still may be susceptible to joining the IS affiliated group, Jund al-Khalifa, or IS cells in the country.

Tunisia's Preparedness

Despite the growing challenge of violent extremism in the country, Tunisian authorities have been slow to develop and communicate a counter-terrorism strategy. A coordinated and coherent response has also been hampered by structural impediments such as a lack of inter-agency cooperation and a dearth of coordination between the security services and the civilian leadership. The security forces have been criticized for adopting a “dragnet” approach, involving mass arrests, often without sufficient evidence, which is likely to prove counterproductive. Measures to stem the flow of foreign fighters were slow to take effect and the authorities are still very much grappling with how to deal with returnees.

Following attacks in 2015, the Tunisian authorities constructed a 200-kilometer barrier made of sand berms and water trenches along part of the border. To help secure the barrier, Germany and the US have been assisting in



Soldiers overlook a trench, that forms part of a barrier along the frontier with Libya, in Sabkhet Alyun, Tunisia February 6, 2016. REUTERS / Zoubeir Souissi

installing an electronic monitoring system. The US has also provided additional military equipment to help monitor the border with Libya and US Special Operations Forces have been assisting Tunisian troops in counterterrorism operations in Tunisia. Reports of the establishment of a US drone base used to conduct surveillance operations over Libya have emerged as well. Mentoring and training of Tunisian forces responsible for preventing illegal cross-border movements from Libya is also being carried out by a small contingent of British troops. These measures may complicate the movement of militants across the land border with Libya. However, they are unlikely to be sufficient.

Part of the problem is that there is no effective partner on the Libyan side. In 2012, Tunisia signed an agreement on security cooperation with Libya, which included joint border patrols, the re-establishment of checkpoints, and exchange of information. However, this amounted to very little, due to the Libyan civil war. Before any similar cooperative arrangement can be re-established and translated into meaningful action, a Libyan government would need to be fully functional. It would need to re-establish its authority in the border region, as well as consolidate the country's security institutions. This will not happen any time soon.

Regional cooperation to limit the growth of IS and violent extremism more generally in North Africa is also underdeveloped. In 2015, Tunisia intensified its cooperation on border security with Algeria, and the two countries also cooperate on counterterrorism, which includes military-to-military cooperation and information-sharing. This kind of bilateral cooperation is a step forward, but a regional approach to what is a regional problem is sorely needed.

Tunisia will, therefore, need sustained international assistance to cope with the knock-on effects of downgrading IS in Sirte and Libya more generally. Such support

should not only focus on training and equipping to improve counterterrorism and border security capacities; it should also be tied to enhancing security sector governance with regards to civilian oversight, accountability and respect for the rule of law. International partners should also work to facilitate regional cooperation on border security and countering violent extremism. The EU's new Global Strategy emphasizes the importance of resilience, capacity building for security provision within the rule of law, and support for practical cooperation in the Maghreb. Tunisia's fragile, but largely successful transition is a beacon of hope for democracy in the region. The EU should focus its resources on safeguarding this transition from the destabilizing effects of violent extremism, taking into account the regional dimension of the latter.

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