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**RISE AND FALL?  
THE RISE AND FALL OF ISIS IN LIBYA**

**Azeem Ibrahim**

**August 2020**

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## FOREWORD

Perhaps even more than in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has suffered a major defeat in Libya. Originally, Libya was to be the second province in ISIS's caliphate, but by 2019 the group has been defeated militarily and eliminated as a political force. But this victory has not been matched by the formation of a stable government and, until this happens, ISIS or some other jihadist group may stage a return in the midst of the ongoing chaos. At the time of this writing, the military campaign by the Libyan National Army (LNA) has stalled outside Tripoli. Now is the time for the United States and the wider international community to step up and help Libya transition to a unitary government with conventional elections. If this fails to happen, the hard-won victory over ISIS in Libya may yet turn out to have been illusory.

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## SUMMARY

This report argues exploiting the military and political defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Libya to eradicate the group completely from the country and weaken its capacity to act elsewhere in North and sub-Saharan Africa is now possible. In addition, the Libyan conflict continues to have consequences for the political stability of Europe via the pressure the migration flows are putting on the political infrastructure of the continent. In turn, this instability has implications for the United States' European strategy, both insofar as commercial interests are concerned and in US capacity to contain Russian assertiveness on the edges of NATO territory.

Almost a decade after the fall of the Muammar Gadhafi regime, Libya effectively has no government. The UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) is notionally supported by three of the four main factions in the country, and Turkey is now the principal external supporter. But these parties are still squabbling over control of vital regions, the degree of federalism needed, and control of the military.

The situation is made worse by Emirati, Egyptian, Saudi, and now Russian sponsorship of the Libyan National Army (LNA) commanded by General Khalifah Haftar. The army is opposed to the Libya Dawn group having any role in the governance of Libya. In turn, Qatar is happy to fund a range of radical groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood-aligned Libya Dawn, as part of its dispute with the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Libya has traditionally followed an austere form of Sunni Islam which, in the nineteenth century, took the form of the Sanusiyah, a movement that is still

influential. The Muslim Brotherhood established itself in Libya in the post-World War II era. Finally, modern Salafi-jihadist groups such as ISIS, al-Qaeda (AQ), and local versions tried to establish themselves using the chaos that has reigned since 2011.

Removing radical Islamist groups from Libya is therefore impractical. But it is important the influence of these groups be minimized within a functioning political system. The Islamic State emerged in Libya in the post-2011 chaos and thrived due to the lack of an effective central government. The group has been driven to the margins, but it can sustain itself from criminal activities, such as people smuggling, drug trafficking, and taxing trade across the Sahara, and it has easy access to weapons and the porous borders of sub-Saharan Africa.

Establishing effective government in Libya should be a priority for these reasons. In effect, ending the civil war between the House of Representatives (HoR) and the LNA in the east and the GNA in the west is the key to preventing any return of ISIS. A pool of potential recruits to ISIS continues to exist due to economic hardship and real grievances, allowing ISIS to recruit, regroup, and reemerge. If we are to exploit the strategic defeat of ISIS in Libya, the overwhelming need is to support the formation of an effective government.

# RISE AND FALL? THE RISE AND FALL OF ISIS IN LIBYA

## INTRODUCTION

### Background

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) managed to exploit the chaos in Libya after the fall of the Muammar Gadhafi regime in 2011 and briefly carve out a degree of control over some coastal cities, especially Sirte, in 2014. By 2016, ISIS had lost control of all territory apart from a few isolated regions in the far south. But the group, largely embedded in the criminal networks involving people smuggling and the drug trade, still has a presence in the country today. Military action by a combination of NATO, Gulf States, and local forces was enough to eliminate the threat ISIS might retain control of population centers and acquire oil revenues as it sought to add a second province to its caliphate. But framing either the emergence or the apparent defeat of ISIS in a vacuum would be a mistake.

The Islamic State's opportunity arose out of the post-Gadhafi chaos, its brief period of ascendancy in Iraq and Syria, and key dynamics within Libyan history and contemporary culture.<sup>1</sup> Understanding the dynamics that led to the rise of ISIS is essential to preventing them from returning as a significant threat in Libya or the wider sub-Saharan region.

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1. Azeem Ibrahim, *The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Syria and Iraq* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College Press, 2014).

Although Libya has only existed as an independent country since 1951, it has historically been divided into three main regions: Tripolitania in the west, Cyrenaica in the east, and a region to the south reaching into the Sahara. But these regions have usually also been combined into one state. Although the tensions among the three regions are real and have had a major influence on modern Libyan history, the best solution would most likely not be to fracture the existing state. Figure 1 shows the provinces into which Libya is divided today.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1. Map of Libya (showing the post-1963 provincial borders)

Map from Congressional Research Service

Beginning in the fifteenth century, Libya was notionally part of the Ottoman Empire, but was largely

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2. Christopher Blanchard, *Libya: Transition and US Policy*, RL33142 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, April 20, 2016), 5.

autonomous until the 1840s. Rivalry with European powers and Ottoman military weakness in Libya led to Italy claiming the region as a colony in 1911. The Italian invasion to reinforce this claim was a disaster, and the Italians signed a peace treaty acknowledging their withdrawal by 1919. But one of the first acts of Benito Mussolini's fascist regime in 1922 was to abrogate the peace treaty and invade Libya again, with the Italians eventually claiming victory in 1932. Italian rule ended with the British occupation of Cyrenaica in 1943. Libya became independent and its pro-Western monarchy ran Libya basically along federal lines, with the old regions having considerable autonomy. Although the discovery of oil reserves led to some corruption, much of the income was also used to expand social services, education, and infrastructure. But the country faced domestic pressure to align itself more closely with Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt. These pressures led to the 1969 military coup led by officers like Gadhafi, who were notionally committed to Nasser's pan-Arabism; they briefly looked for a union with Egypt, but this approach ended with Nasser's death. Nevertheless, Gadhafi's rule quickly evolved into an authoritarian regime that seemed happy to support almost any violent movement in Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and beyond.

Since the fall of Gadhafi's regime in 2011, governance of Libya has been fragmented. Initially, four major power blocs were in place. Three were notionally committed to the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA): the Sanusiyah-influenced General National Congress (GNC) and the House of Representatives (HoR), which are based in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, respectively, and the Muslim Brotherhood-influenced Libya Dawn, with its power

base around Tripoli. These regional and factional divisions made creating an effective government difficult. By 2017, the HoR and the LNA, backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, and the Saudis, commenced a military offensive to capture Tripoli from the GNA and its allies (backed by the UN, Qatar, and Turkey). By early 2020, the offensive had stalled, creating an opportunity for a potential political settlement. But such a solution will not be easy, especially given the Emirati and Egyptian opposition to any dealings with the Muslim Brotherhood.

### **Radical Islamism in Libya**

The Sanusiyah movement stressed the need for simplicity, piety, and the elimination of modern innovations from Islam. In theory, the movement had much in common with Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, though in practice it proved to be more tolerant of other forms of Islam and other faiths. The movement formed the basis of the modernizing, pro-Western monarchy that ruled from 1951 to 1969.

The Gadhafi regime's attitude to Islam changed over time. The regime started out as secular in a Nasserist mode, but later embraced its own form of Islam. Gadhafi saw the Sanusis as a major threat—first as exiled supporters of the monarchy, and later as Islamist groups trying to overthrow the regime. Internationally, he backed an eclectic range of movements, running from the secular Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine to Western European Marxist terrorist groups and Islamist movements in sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria (where the regime backed the movement that has since become Boko Haram), and the Philippines.

The religious turmoil created fertile ground that was later exploited, first by al-Qaeda (AQ), and later by ISIS. Although the Sanusiyah diverged from Wahhabism and its modern-day Salafi variant, the two ideologies have much in common.<sup>3</sup> Understanding modern Libyan politics requires understanding the relations between the Sanusiyah-inspired Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and the main international jihadist groupings.<sup>4</sup> At a senior level, the LIFG has kept its distance from AQ and ISIS, but individual members have often moved to whichever jihadist group is seen to be the most effective. By the time of Gadhafi's fall, the LIFG had been defeated in Libya and was moving away from terrorism toward a more political approach. As part of its wider network in Saharan Africa, AQ, however, had managed to establish a small presence in Libya prior to 2011.<sup>5</sup> This presence, which was limited to Sirte, mostly comprised ex-LIFG militants. Al-Qaeda played a minimal role in the revolt against the Gadhafi regime and sought to cooperate with other militant groups rather than supplant them.

The Islamic State developed its presence in Libya by exploiting the post-Gadhafi chaos and preventing North African militants from moving to Syria and

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3. Azeem Ibrahim, *Radical Origins: Why We Are Losing the Battle against Islamic Extremism – And How to Turn the Tide* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2017).

4. Library of Congress, *Al-Qaeda in Libya: A Profile* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, August 2012).

5. Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," Stanford, updated July 2018, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/aqim>.

Iraq, thereby building its network.<sup>6</sup> The Islamic State saw Libya as a potential second province in its caliphate and a region where it could access arms and supplies. Libya also provided ISIS a useful distraction from Western pressure in Iraq and Syria and a means through which to expand the group's network in North Africa.<sup>7</sup>

ISIS's presence also alienated most potential allies due to the group's sectarian approach to other Islamist groups. The Islamic State was driven out of coastal strongholds by a combination of Western air strikes and local militias. The group never gained control of oil revenues, and it diverted funding and resources to back an Islamist revolt in the Sinai Peninsula, leaving its network in Libya short of funds. By 2016, its remaining fighters had fled to the south, and ISIS was reduced to extracting revenues from the trans-Saharan trade, people smuggling, and the drug trade.<sup>8</sup>

## Options

Context matters, and even a modern movement like ISIS or AQ is embedded in the existing politics, history, and culture of a region. To ensure neither has a route to return to prominence in Libya, one must

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6. House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *Libya: Examination of Intervention and Collapse and the UK's Future Policy Options*, HC 119 (London, UK: House of Commons, September 14, 2016)

7. Charlie Winter, *Libya: The Strategic Gateway for the Islamic State* (London, UK: Quilliam, 2015).

8. Aidan Lewis, "Islamic State Shifts to Libya's Desert Valleys after Sirte Defeat," Reuters, February 10, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-islamicstate/islamic-state-shifts-to-libyas-desert-valleys-after-sirte-defeat-idUSKBN15P1GX>.

understand the reason Libya was so attractive to these groups.

One key issue is Libya has a long history of resisting external intervention.<sup>9</sup> The pirates who preyed on the central Mediterranean from the fifteenth to the early nineteenth centuries were feted by both rulers and the wider populace. The money, slaves, and ransoms they brought from raids were the bedrock of the local economy; the loss of this revenue, after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, allowed the Ottomans to reassert more direct control in the 1840s. The successful resistance to Italian colonialism between 1911 and 1919 and the scars of the brutal Italian rule in the 1930s are part of the national narrative.

Radical Islamism equally has long had a place in Libya, and the nineteenth-century Sanusiyah movement added a degree of religious revivalism and helped fuse religion with nationalism. This fusion has created an environment where the Sanusiyah-inspired movements have real ideological and practical differences from contemporary Salafi movements, but individual militants cross this divide easily, joining the group that seems best placed to accomplish their personal goals.

Effectively, radical Islamism in one form or another, allied with Libyan nationalism, is not going to disappear. As long as radical Islamism remains, the risk of a revival by either AQ or ISIS is real, especially when both groups can exploit real grievances and the problems stemming from weak governance.

Creating an effective government must be the first priority. The GNA is weak and fragmented

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9. Ali A. Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya: State Formation, Colonization, and Resistance* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2014).

among the three major political factions in Libya. This situation is exacerbated by the external influence of the UAE and Egypt, which sponsor the LNA as a counterweight primarily because of their opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood (as well as Qatar's backing of the brotherhood). The UN has recognized the GNA and has urged all external powers to stop sponsoring individual factions and to try to force dialogue between them.

Once formed, a central government will need substantial help, but this help should be provided on Libya's own terms. In effect, the government should be able to request what it needs, rather than have solutions imposed on it. Many experts and professionals have either left the country or been killed in the unrest, and many fear ISIS and AQ have infiltrated the weak structures that do exist.

## **THE CONTEXT OF MODERN LIBYA**

Up to the late Middle Ages, the political geography of the land that is now modern Libya was one of relatively isolated coastal cities engaged in both trade and piracy across the Mediterranean with a nomadic tribal population in the regions reaching into the Sahara. At times, Libya was largely independent, while at others, it was effectively ruled by its neighbor, Egypt. At other stages, the various coastal cities formed local alliances based on the long-standing divisions of the two coastal regions of Tripolitania in the west and Cyrenaica in the east.

From the fifteenth century to 1911, Libya was a province of the Ottoman Empire, though at times the area was largely independent. Direct Ottoman rule was reestablished in 1835, but the Ottomans only

controlled a few towns in the south for the purposes of trade oversight. By the start of the twentieth century, Ottoman authority was notional rather than effective in this region.

The Italian invasion in 1911 set off a long period of war and revolt within the country until it was finally conquered in the early 1930s. The period of Italian rule was an economic disaster marked by frequent revolts and a net reduction in the population.

After the Second World War, some attempted to create an independent Cyrenaica, but Libya emerged as a unitary state under a constitutional monarchy in 1951. Initially the regime was pro-Western, allowing substantial US, French, and British military bases, and it stayed out of the various Arab-Israeli wars in the 1950s and 1960s. But the country had also become reliant on Egypt for technical aid and experienced professional workers, which resulted in a growth in support for Nasser's brand of Arab socialism.

The resulting military coup in 1969 brought Colonel Gadhafi to power. Initially, this regime remained pro-Egypt and turned to the Soviet bloc for aid and weaponry, but, by the mid-1970s, the regime had broken its links with Egypt and was an unreliable ally of the Soviets. Combined with a foreign policy more oriented toward Africa than other Arab states, the regime was left isolated and seen as a major regional problem by other Arab countries. Terrorist attacks organized or funded by the regime also led to growing conflict with the United States in the 1980s.

In the aftermath of the fall of Saddam Hussein, Gadhafi offered to stop developing chemical and nuclear weapons and to cooperate with Western powers against AQ and linked groups. The Libyans provided close intelligence cooperation, primarily

aimed at members of the LIFG. The new political relationship was emphasized, with visits to Libya by the British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Domestically, the regime remained repressive, which led to a major revolt as part of the wider Arab Spring in 2011. Gadhafi's regime fell in 2011, and he was killed in Libya in 2012. His sons fled into exile or were arrested or killed. Since then, Libya has been plagued by conflict between several power centers and Islamist militias, including ISIS and AQ.

### **Islam in Libya**

Islam arrived in Libya in the seventh century with the wave of Arab conquests in North Africa, and was initially limited to the coastal cities. The inland tribes retained their pagan beliefs before converting in the eleventh century. Some elements of the old belief systems were retained well into the twentieth century, including, in places, a matriarchal social system.<sup>10</sup> Libyan Islam was overwhelmingly Sunni, but split into different strands. Although a relatively austere strand of Sunni jurisprudence dominated, Sufism retained a strong grip and, to some extent, fused with pre-Islamic beliefs. Libya was affected by the wider Islamic revival in the nineteenth century when the Sufi-influenced Sanusiyah movement came to prominence. This movement had close links with a similar form of Islam in the Sudan and shared an opposition to the growing Western colonial interests (which were often linked to the spread of Christianity).

The Sanusiyah movement was concentrated in Cyrenaica. Although the movement promoted an

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10. Ahmida, *Making of Modern Libya*.

austere form of Islam and called for a return to the purity of early Islam, it also rejected the sectarian approach of the emerging Wahhabi doctrine in Arabia.<sup>11</sup> As had happened earlier in Sudan, this new strand of Islam fused with nationalist sentiment and became a source of national dissent first aimed at Ottoman rule and, later, against Italian colonial rule. The Sanusiyah movement also sought to challenge the perceived French sponsorship of Christianity across the Saharan region, as this was believed to be a prelude to the imposition of colonial rule.

## Demographics

At the end of the nineteenth century, the population of Libya was around 1.6 million, mostly concentrated in the coastal cities, and largely of Arab or Berber descent. The exception was a substantial Tuareg minority in the south. The long war with Italy, followed by the brutal occupation, reduced the country's population to around 861,000 in 1940. As a result of a policy of encouraging migration from Italy during the occupation, about 12 percent of the remaining population in 1940 was Italian, and of the rest, almost all were Arab or Berber.

After World War II almost all Italians left the country, but Libya's population still increased fivefold, from 1.13 million people in the late 1950s to 5.8 million people in 2006, mainly as a result of the granting of citizenship to Palestinian, Tunisian, and Egyptian immigrant workers. Some of these workers arrived to staff the new civil administration and education systems created in the 1950s, but most came after the expansion of the oil and gas industries

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11. Ibrahim, *Radical Origins*.

in the 1960s. Although estimates indicate 3 percent of the population by 2011 was foreign workers, in reality, first- and second-generation migrants who have already been granted citizenship make up a substantial portion of the population.

These arrivals changed the demographics of Libya and affected domestic politics. Many teachers and university lecturers arrived from Egypt and brought with them support for Nasser's forms of Arab socialism and nationalism.<sup>12</sup> This shift in views had consequences when the Libyan government chose neutrality during the 1967 Six-Day War. Rioting broke out in Benghazi and Tripoli, with attacks on the US and United Kingdom (UK) embassies and the Libyan Jewish community. This neutrality added to growing complaints about both corruption and perceived pro-Cyrenaica policies, creating a substantial movement increasingly opposed to the monarchy.

The dramatic population increase had significant effects on Libyan politics and its tribal influences. Many Libyan nationals are now first- or second-generation immigrants who have retained dual nationality or have close family members living in nearby countries. These dual nationals were among those most attractive to AQ and ISIS because of their ability to cross borders and readily return to their other country. This mobility, along with the relative loss of control over Libya's borders, provided the means for groups like ISIS to send its militants throughout North Africa in pursuit of its wider goals.

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12. Gerasimos Tsourapas, *The Politics of Egyptian Migration to Libya* (Tacoma, WA: Middle East Research and Information Project, March 17, 2015).

## Early Modern History

Coastal Libya was briefly occupied by Ottoman troops in the early seventeenth century, reasserting Ottoman control. But this direct control did not last long, and a revolt saw formal Ottoman influence significantly diminished. A new ruler, Ahmed Karamanli, took control and opted to accept some degree of Ottoman protection, declaring himself the pasha of Tripoli in 1722. He and his sons managed to take control of the main towns and trading routes to the south. In the search for revenues, he and his successors deliberately sponsored piracy in the central Mediterranean region, extorting protection money from other nations in exchange for not raiding their ships. These acts led to war with the United States in 1801–5, which ended with the United States paying a ransom for its captured sailors.<sup>13</sup>

The end of the Napoleonic Wars brought the renewed attention of outside powers to the problem of piracy. The British sent a fleet to force the release of Christian slaves in 1816 and, by 1820, the British and French had ended the payment of protection money. The loss of revenues from piracy, combined with the need to pay debts imposed by the British and French, led to a series of revolts within Libya.

In response, the Ottomans intervened, overthrew the king, and restored direct rule in 1835. The renewal of direct Ottoman rule was beneficial for coastal Libya. Ottoman approaches to jurisprudence, administration, and education were introduced, and slavery was abolished in 1889. By the 1880s the

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13. Khalil Matar and Robert W. Thabit, *Lockerbie and Libya: A Study in International Relations* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2003).

economy had declined, as trans-Saharan trade routes were interrupted and agriculture in Tripolitania faced a prolonged drought. In addition, the weakening leadership of the Ottoman Empire and growing unrest across its wider territory meant Libya became a backwater nation, forced to spend most of the locally raised revenues on the military (see table 1), at a time when military demands were increasing.

**Table 1. Ottoman state expenditures in Libya, 1881<sup>14</sup>**

Type of Expenditure	Amount (in Piasters)
Interior department	998,600
Finance department	468,202
Religious courts	99,840
Justice department	946,188
Education	31,396
Other salaries	409,236
Quarantine office	1,200
Postal office	103,190
Military	6,785,140

The need for a substantial military presence to hold onto the main cities in the south created a major problem. Despite growing wealth, keeping up with the increased costs was difficult for the Ottomans and, as a consequence, they ended the practice of exempting foreigners from taxation in 1902. See table 2 for a breakdown of tax categories. The revenues of the province were significantly greater than in the decades before, but so were the costs.

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14. Ahmida, *Making of Modern Libya*, 58.

**Table 2. Ottoman state revenues from Libya, 1881 and 1906<sup>15</sup>**

<b>Types of Taxes</b>	<b>1881 (in Piasters)</b>	<b>1906 (in Piasters)</b>
Livestock	150,025	478,428
Production	5,000,000	11,291,858
Military	43,350	241,748
Property	—	9,104,088
Profit	—	79,770
Income from state property	—	14,000
Court fees	—	147,874

Over a 25-year period, the Ottomans expanded manufacturing to the point where it became the dominant source of state revenues in Libya and introduced an effective system of property taxation.

### **From 1900 to 1951**

The decision to tax foreigners specifically affected Italy because the Bank of Rome had actively encouraged Italian settlement and the buying of land. The Italians invaded in 1911 and faced substantial resistance as the Young Turk regime then in power in Istanbul sent money and weapons to the local rebels. The Sanusiyah movement galvanized the people and ensured resistance to the Italian occupation was both nationalist and religious. As a result, Italian gains in Libya were initially limited, and by April 1915, Italy

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15. Ahmida, *Making of Modern Libya*, 64.

had suffered a major defeat to the rebels in the Battle of Qasr bu Hadi.

Encouraged by their Ottoman backers, the rebels then attacked British-occupied Egypt upon Turkey's entrance into the Great War. The invasion was soundly defeated in 1916, resulting in an accord between the British and the Sanusis to end the expedition. By 1918, the Libyans had effectively defeated the Italian invasion. A Libyan Republic was proclaimed in November 1918, followed by a peace treaty with Italy in April 1919. The deal recognized the head of the Sanusis, Idris I, as ruler of Cyrenaica and the south. This deal led to a civil war, partly on regional lines and partly because of the religious divisions between the Sanusis and the other forms of Islam. In the end, Idris notionally became ruler of Libya, but his hold on power was short-lived.<sup>16</sup>

Citing the need to protect its citizens and commercial interests, Italy deployed troops to Libya and reoccupied the city of Misratah in January 1922. Once Mussolini had established his fascist regime in Rome later that year, one of his first acts was to discard the 1919 peace treaty and expand the Italian occupation into a full-scale invasion of Libya. Again, the Italians made slow gains. The Libyans set aside their differences to form a united front in 1924 and waged both a guerrilla and a conventional war. By 1930, the Italians took Fezzan, and by late 1931, they had defeated the last organized Libyan army. Pietro Badoglio, the Italian governor, declared Libya an Italian province in January 1932.

The result was disastrous for the local population. The Italians removed all civil rights from the native

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16. John Wright, *Libya: A Modern History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

population, placed rebellious tribes into prison camps, and starved thousands of the rebels to death. At the same time, land was appropriated for the new Italian colonists as the Italian population of Libya increased from 50,000 in 1934 to 90,000 in 1939.

When Italy entered World War II alongside Germany, the British made full use of their existing contacts with the Sanusiyah hierarchy to offer Libya postwar independence. The fighting in Libya from 1940 to 1943 added to its economic problems, leaving all major ports badly damaged and the countryside littered with mines. The destruction was particularly bad in Cyrenaica around Tobruk and Benghazi, while Tripolitania suffered relatively little war damage. The British imposed military rule in Cyrenaica after the Axis retreat, while Tripolitania gained a greater degree of local autonomy. Cyrenaica attempted to gain its independence from the British and the rest of Libya twice between 1945 and 1949. At the same time, Tripolitania was run by the nationalist party, which had no influence in the eastern region. Fezzan in the south had its own political party and was under French control. Because of the political fractures in Libya, the UN was initially unwilling to sanction independence, but agreed to do so in 1950 due to increased pressure and a lack of viable alternatives.

## **From 1951 to 1969**

### *Independence*

In 1951, Libya became an independent kingdom based around the three provinces of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan. The new state was created as a hereditary monarchy with Islam as the state religion.

The monarchy was liberal and allowed freedom of worship, a focus on individual freedoms, and an open approach to granting Libyan citizenship, which could be acquired by anyone who lived in the country for at least 10 years. Initially, the state was governed on a federal basis to reflect the historical divisions within the country, but was reorganized into 10 provinces in 1963. The constitutional document from that reorganization has since been suggested as a form of governance for the post-Gadhafi state, even if the actual monarchy is not restored.<sup>17</sup>

After gaining independence, the economy remained weak and Libya became reliant on substantial foreign aid. Both Britain and the United States supported Libya while operating several military bases in the country in exchange.<sup>18</sup> Libya generally avoided close involvement with the Soviet Union and remained neutral during the 1956 Suez Crisis.

### *Oil and Gas*

The Libyan oil and gas fields exist in three main clusters. The bulk of the fields are to the east of Sirte in Cyrenaica, a large group exists to the south of Tripoli, and a final group is located in the far south, west of Murzuq.<sup>19</sup>

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17. Ali Cheaib, "Libya Foreign Minister Calls for Return of Monarchy," Al-Monitor, April 7, 2014, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/04/libya-foreign-minister-interview-return-monarchy.html>.

18. Matar and Thabit, *Lockerbie and Libya*.

19. Neil Thompson, "Libyan Oil: A Bittersweet Return?," Foreign Policy Blogs, December 24, 2016, <https://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2016/12/24libyan-oil-bittersweet-return/>.

Libya had been suspected to have substantial oil reserves since the end of the nineteenth century, but the sites could not be explored or exploited with the technology available at the time. After World War II, oil exploration by mostly US, French, and British companies commenced, and reserves were found close to the Algerian border in 1955. The Libyan government established a system where the state took 50 percent of any profits, in addition to a 12.5-percent royalty on revenues.<sup>20</sup> The closure of the Suez Canal after 1956 and the existence of the perceived stable, pro-Western government led to substantial exploration along the Algerian border. By 1960, the reserves in the west were under development, and pipeline and port facilities had been constructed at Marsa al Burayqah and As Sidra. A larger terminal was constructed at Marsa al Hariqah near Tripoli in 1967.

An immediate advantage for Libya was that Libyan oil is a relatively light crude, meaning it needs little refining to produce consumable products. In 1969, annual oil production was about three million barrels a day, yielding substantial revenues and giving Libya the highest gross domestic product per capita in Africa. Although the monarchy was not particularly corrupt and allocated a substantial amount of the new revenues to social, health, and educational programs, too little of this new wealth reached ordinary people. The inequitable distribution of this wealth created discontent among the growing professional and middle class. Coupled with the pro-Nasser nationalist politics of the people, this substantial political dissent led to the 1969 military coup that brought Gadhafi to power.

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20. Ramadan Aburawi, "Half a Century of Oil in Libya," *GEOExPro* 6, no. 1 (2009).

The new regime nationalized the oil industry in 1970, and exports dropped to two million barrels a day within two years. In the aftermath of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Libya joined the wider Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries plan to reduce oil sales, and production fell further to 1.5 million barrels a day. Libya's growing international isolation linked to its sponsorship of international terrorism further reduced exports to just over one million barrels a day in 1988. Production partly recovered by the mid-1990s to 1.4 million barrels a day, and then began to expand steadily once Gadhafi announced the end of his program to develop weapons of mass destruction and handed the accused perpetrators of the Lockerbie bombing over for trial in The Hague. After 2003, foreign investment began to pour into the country to improve Libya's antiquated production and transport systems.<sup>21</sup>

By 2011, just before Gadhafi's fall, oil production was about 1.6 million barrels a day, and production of natural gas was just under 17 billion cubic meters per annum.<sup>22</sup> Libya had proven reserves of 48 billion barrels of oil and 1.539 trillion cubic meters of natural gas.<sup>23</sup> Some experts also believe the complex geology of Libya means substantial, additional reserves exist to the south of Benghazi that have not been detected.<sup>24</sup>

The regime exercised control over oil and gas revenues in four ways. First, Libya's foreign

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21. Waniss Otman and Erling Karlberg, *The Libyan Economy: Economic Diversification and International Repositioning* (Berlin: Springer, 2007).

22. "Libya Natural Gas—Production," Index Mundi, last updated December 7, 2019, [https://www.indexmundi.com/libya/natural\\_gas\\_production.html](https://www.indexmundi.com/libya/natural_gas_production.html).

23. "Libya Natural Gas."

24. Aburawi, "Oil in Libya."

investments improved as the regime sought to create an oil fund and remove assets from the country. Second, the country began substantial funding of its engagements in Africa and international terrorism. Third, the regime continued the policy the old monarchy had upheld of transferring some of the wealth into domestic social, educational, and health programs. Finally, Gadhafi and his immediate family and inner circle ensured a substantial sum was moved into their private bank accounts.<sup>25</sup> One estimate speculates the regime's corruption removed \$120 billion from the economy and invested the funds in European and Middle Eastern banks.<sup>26</sup>

From 2003 onwards, the regime also invested in improving its reputation in Western Europe, offering help to Italy after the 2009 earthquake at L'Aquila and investing in British universities such as the London School of Economics.<sup>27</sup> The regime purchased a stake in the Italian football club Juventus, as ties with Italy had improved after the United States imposed sanctions in 1982. In return, access to Libya's oil and gas reserves was granted to oil companies associated with perceived friendly regimes.

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25. Tom Bawden and John Hooper, "Gaddafis' Hidden Billions: Dubai Banks, Plush London Pads and Italian Water," *Guardian*, February 22, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/feb/22/gaddafi-libya-oil-wealth-portfolio>.

26. Bawden and Hooper, "Gaddafis' Hidden Billions."

27. Graeme Paton and Steven Swinford, "Libya: LSE Feared 'Embarrassing' Gaddafi's Son over Donation," *Daily Telegraph*, March 5, 2011, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8362602/Libya-LSE-feared-embarrassing-Gaddafis-son-over-donation.html>.

## Gadhafi

A military coup in 1969 ushered in Gadhafi's Libyan Arab Republic.<sup>28</sup> For practical purposes, the regime was profoundly authoritarian. The regime silenced domestic dissent and was prepared to attack its perceived enemies when they were abroad. But, in terms of wider trends, the regime shifted focus three times.

- Until 1974, the regime could be considered Nasserist; it had the ostensible goal of union with Egypt and had sent a military contingent to help Egypt during the 1973 Yom Kippur War.<sup>29</sup>
- From 1974 to 2003, the regime was isolated within the wider Arab world and focused mostly on Africa and sponsoring a variety of international terrorist groups.<sup>30</sup>
- From 2003 through 2011, the regime found common ground with the United States, the United Kingdom, and other NATO countries by conflating its domestic opposition with the international struggle against AQ, ending its embryonic attempt to gain weapons of mass destruction, and increasingly welcoming international investment and a parade of Western leaders.<sup>31</sup>

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28. Anna Baldinetti, *The Origins of the Libyan Nation: Colonial Legacy, Exile and the Emergence of a New Nation-State* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2014).

29. Matar and Thabit, *Lockerbie and Libya*.

30. Baldinetti, *Origins of the Libyan Nation*.

31. Flynt L. Leverett, "Why Libya Gave up on the Bomb," Brookings, January 23, 2004, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/why-libya-gave-up-on-the-bomb/>.

Despite this shift in international orientation, some common themes emerged. The underlying orientation of Gadhafi's regime was toward his own version of socialism. When the US and UK military bases were closed, the regime adopted a broadly pro-Soviet foreign policy while avoiding close links with the Soviets and having to accept Soviet technicians for its military purchases. Although the regime had notionally nationalized the oil industry, in reality this was an extreme version of the monarchy's practice of handing out exploration and exploitation licenses for five-year blocks and reassigning such licenses among competing providers. This practice gave the regime considerable discretion over the parties that were allowed to operate in the country, and US and European companies continued to operate in Libya up to the early 1980s, and again after 2003. An important part of the regime's approach to international business was to use oil and access to it as a lever for political advantage and as a source of bribes for those in power.<sup>32</sup>

### *Domestic Opposition*

Initially, the Gadhafi regime faced little organized domestic opposition and probably had the passive support of most of the population. Oil revenues enabled investments in social provision, education, and health, as well as the development of the infrastructure of major cities. The regime projected a veneer of democracy to help minimize dissent.

Initially, the opposition fell into two groups. Supporters of the monarchy mostly fled into exile, but retained some presence in Cyrenaica, where the

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32. Bawden and Hooper, "Gaddafis' Hidden Billions."

monarchy had always been more popular. A second group included individuals who had fallen out with Gadhafi and in turn were often murdered or forced into exile. Supporters of the old regime and people who had been alienated from the new regime were weak within Libya and mainly existed among the wider Libyan diaspora.

Within Libya, the most effective domestic opposition to Gadhafi's regime from the 1980s onward came from Islamist-orientated organizations. The various Islamist groups either organized themselves as the LIFG or remained organizationally close to the Muslim Brotherhood. The latter retained substantial support in the region around Tripoli and reemerged as the Libya Dawn militia organization after Gadhafi's fall.

The LIFG had its roots in supporters of the Islamist Sanusiyah movement. The LIFG's ideology was based on the purification of Islam and the removal of Western influences, giving it some ideological overlap with the Salafi ideology of AQ.<sup>33</sup> But these links were tenuous, as the LIFG's focus was on the governance of Libya, not global jihad.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, many individuals who were to become prominent in the LIFG had fled Libya in the 1980s and fought the Soviets with other jihadists in Afghanistan. In that country the LIFG made links with the emerging AQ and the wider doctrines of Salafi jihadism.<sup>35</sup>

Returning to Libya in the early 1990s, the LIFG first tried to build up its base in Benghazi and eastern

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33. CISAC, "Libyan Islamic Fighting Group," Stanford, updated July 2018, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/libyan-islamic-fighting-group>.

34. Library of Congress, *Al-Qaeda in Libya*.

35. Ibrahim, *Radical Origins*.

Libya. The LIFG commenced its campaign of armed resistance in 1995 and attempted to assassinate Gadhafi in 1996.<sup>36</sup> This attack may have been funded by British intelligence, as the United Kingdom sought revenge on Gadhafi for the killing of a British police officer in 1984 and Libyan funding for the Irish Republican Army.<sup>37</sup> British support for LIFG was to prove transitory and, by the mid-2000s, the United Kingdom began to arrest and transfer LIFG militants back to Gadhafi's jails.<sup>38</sup>

Regardless of the source of funding, the assassination attempt provoked a round of repression and further violence, prompting the LIFG to send potential fighters to Sudan for training that used AQ bases. Further repression by the government meant that by 2000, most of the LIFG's membership was in exile; as a result, militants either joined AQ affiliates or worked directly with AQ during this period. The LIFG kept its distance from AQ, mainly because the former believed nothing would come from attacking the West when its sworn enemy was Gadhafi.<sup>39</sup> The LIFG did not back various AQ actions, such as the bombing of the USS Cole in 1998, and apparently warned AQ against attacking the US mainland in 2001.<sup>40</sup>

In 2007, the Gadhafi regime attempted to dampen domestic opposition by releasing some members of militant opposition groups, including the LIFG. In

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36. CISAC, "Libyan Islamic Fighting Group."

37. Gary Gambill, "The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)," Jamestown, May 5, 2005, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-libyan-islamic-fighting-group-lifg/>.

38. John C. K. Daly, "Libya and Al-Qaeda: A Complex Relationship," Jamestown, May 5, 2005, <https://jamestown.org/program/libya-and-al-qaeda-a-complex-relationship/>.

39. Library of Congress, *Al-Qaeda in Libya*.

40. CISAC, "Libyan Islamic Fighting Group."

2009, the LIFG's imprisoned leadership broke fully with AQ's ideology and announced "that the use of violence as a means of overthrowing governments in Muslim countries was illegal from an Islamic point of view," marking a substantial break from the normal ideology of Salafi-jihadist groups.<sup>41</sup> This break was significant because the LIFG was well respected in wider jihadist circles, and it marked a final organizational and ideological split with AQ. The LIFG formally disbanded in 2010, though it has been suggested many militants joined the Libyan Islamic Movement based around Tripoli in 2011 or the emerging AQ network in the country.

Until 2003, the LIFG had attracted little attention outside Libya.<sup>42</sup> Even in exile, its militants did not seek to attack the West, and the group's relative distance from the core of AQ meant the LIFG was not an immediate target of Western intelligence services. To some extent, the group gained a degree of tolerance from foreign intelligence services because it was an enemy of the Gadhafi regime.

After the US-led invasion of Iraq, Gadhafi announced he would abandon his attempts to produce chemical and nuclear weapons.<sup>43</sup> The reward was a lifting of UN sanctions and slowly increasing amounts of foreign investment, primarily in Libya's oil industry. A secondary consequence was the British, in particular, started to arrest exiled members of the

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41. Library of Congress, *Al-Qaeda in Libya*, 9; and Ibrahim, *Radical Origins*.

42. Daly, "Libya and Al-Qaeda."

43. Leverett, "Why Libya Gave up."

LIFG and return them to Libya.<sup>44</sup> Some experts have suggested this created an opening for AQ to establish itself in Libya as the LIFG fragmented and lost its leadership.<sup>45</sup>

*Foreign Policy: The Arab World*

In many ways, the regime was more notable for its shifts in international relations than its domestic policy. At first, reflecting the Nasserist base of much of its support, the regime sought to reinforce its pro-Egypt leanings by sending troops to help Egypt in the 1973 Yom Kippur War with Israel. This improvement foundered as Anwar Sadat moved toward rapprochement with Israel. Relations worsened between Libya and Egypt as the two countries came close to war in 1974 and ended up in open conflict in 1977. In response, first Sadat and then Hosni Mubarak reduced the level of Egyptian support to Libya (in particular of teachers) as they sought to isolate a regime they thought was out of control.<sup>46</sup>

Relations also suffered with Libyan neighbor Tunisia, which feared aggression and acts of state-sponsored terrorism and wished to retain its pro-France policies. As a result of Libyan actions, the mainstream elements of the Palestinian Liberation Organization avoided any public engagement

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44. Peter Taylor, "UK Government 'Approved Abdel Hakim Belhaj's Rendition,'" BBC, April 9, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-17651797>.

45. Ian Cobain, "MI5 Says Rendition of Libyan Opposition Leaders Strengthened Al-Qaida," *Guardian*, January 29, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/29/mi5-rendition-libyan-opposition-strengthened-al-qaida>.

46. Tsourapas, *The Politics of Egyptian Migration*; and Matar and Thabit, *Lockerbie and Libya*.

with Libya, especially after the regime started to fund, support, and use a shifting coalition of small, extremist Palestinian groups as part of its sponsorship of international terrorism.

Despite the opposition, Gadhafi continued pursuing various unity schemes; these included attempts to forge close links with the pro-Western states in northwest Africa and with Syria. Attempts at establishing a political union with Syria failed, but the shared distaste for Egyptian policy toward Israel by the two regimes and their anti-Western ideology meant close links with the Hafiz al-Assad regime were established and sustained.

### *Foreign Policy: Africa*

Libya's relative isolation in the Arab world seemed to have little effect on the regime as it then chose to emphasize its Berber and Tuareg roots rather than see itself as a particularly Arabic state. The regime's international focus then turned to concentrate on building relations with other African nations.

A major effort of this African focus was to lead the creation of the African Union (AU) in 1999 as a successor body to the Organization for African Unity.<sup>47</sup> Over the next 12 years, Libya was the main financial backer of the AU. This support, added to direct

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47. Robert Nolan, "The African Union after Gaddafi," *Journal of Diplomacy* (blog), *Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*, December 5, 2011, <http://blogs.shu.edu/journalofdiplomacy/2011/12/the-african-union-after-gaddafi/>; and Karen MacGregor, "Gaddafi Muscles in on Mbeki's Big Day as African Union Struggles into Being," *Independent*, July 9, 2002, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/gaddafi-muscles-in-on-mbekis-big-day-as-african-union-struggles-into-being-183494.html>.

investment in other African states, may have totaled as much as \$150 billion. Gadhafi in particular pushed the AU to support the idea of a single state covering the whole of Africa. As a result of his support, the AU made several attempts to intervene during the Libyan civil war to prop up the Gadhafi regime and call for a cease-fire.

But Gadhafi was not just content to bankroll the AU and issue rallying calls for pan-Africanism. His regime also intervened directly; this included sending troops to sustain Idi Amin's dictatorship in Uganda between 1972 and 1979 and a series of military interventions in other North African states.<sup>48</sup> Libyan actions included support for the Sudanese People's Liberation Army in the 1970s, a direct invasion of Chad starting in the 1970s, providing training for terrorist groups in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and backing a Tuareg rebellion in Mali. These actions, combined with anti-African riots in Tripoli in 2000, left Gadhafi partly isolated, reliant on the support of other dictators like Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, and shunned by the more democratic states.

The poor relations with other nations had long-term consequences. In revenge for Libya's earlier backing of Islamist rebels and calling for Nigeria's partition, Nigeria voted with other members of the UN Security Council to support NATO's intervention in the Libyan civil war, although other AU leaders maintained their traditional opposition to any attempt

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48. Adekeye Adebajo, "Gaddafi: The Man Who Would Be King of Africa," *Guardian*, August 26, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/aug/26gaddafi-legacy-meddling-africa>.

by outsiders to intervene in the internal affairs of a member state.<sup>49</sup>

In the end, Gadhafi's attempts to position himself as a lead player in African politics failed for several reasons. His clear preference for dictatorial over democratic regimes meant many states were cautious, especially when this was linked to his support for various extremist rebellions. Equally, his positioning of Libya as a Berber-Tuareg state led to racist attacks on black African workers and migrants as well as a loss of support among the Christian groups and states in sub-Saharan Africa. But his substantial funding of the AU meant he remained an important figure and, indirectly, the West gained from this. Libyan largesse allowed AU peacekeeping missions that have been important in Somalia, Burundi, and sub-Saharan Africa in dealing with various Islamist insurgencies.

The links forged in the Gadhafi era matter now, especially as ISIS in Libya looks to recover from its setbacks. The old regime had a long history of using the porous borders in the Sahara to send money, weapons, and fighters to fuel conflicts. Gadhafi also had close links to a range of violent groups engaged in conflicts across North and Central Africa. The regime externally had sought out and funded a range of Islamic groups engaged in localized disputes with their respective states.

### *International Terrorism*

To many Western powers, the main reason the Gadhafi regime was problematic was its continued support for international terrorism. This support involved the killing of exiled Libyans by the regime

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49. Adebajo, "Gaddafi."

in various Western countries and meant direct attacks on Western powers. The latter became more prevalent in the 1980s as Libya started to challenge the West more directly. Various terrorist acts were attributed to the regime, including the shooting of a British police officer in 1984, the bombing of a discotheque used by US servicemembers in Berlin in 1986, and the destruction of a Pan Am airplane over Scotland in 1988 and a French plane over Niger in 1989.<sup>50</sup>

At the same time, the Libyans and the United States engaged in open military conflict in the Gulf of Sidra, which the Libyans claimed as territorial waters.<sup>51</sup> Some of the terrorist attacks in Europe were probably in revenge for Libyan losses in this dispute, as well as for US acts of retaliation, such as the bombing raids in 1986.

Libya started to fund terrorist groups active in NATO countries, notably sending arms and funding to the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland and Euskadi Ta Askatasuna in Spain.<sup>52</sup> In line with the regime's support for the most extreme Palestinian groups, the regime may have sent support and provided training camps to groups such as the German Red Army Faction and the Italian Red Brigades. Since the latter also had close links to groups like the Popular Front for the Liberation of

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50. Simon Tisdall, "Gaddafi: A Vicious, Sinister Despot Driven out on Tidal Wave of Hatred," *Guardian*, August 23, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/23/libya-gaddafi-vicious-despot>.

51. David Blundy and Andrew Lycett, *Qaddafi and the Libyan Revolution* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987).

52. House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, *HM Government Support for UK Victims of IRA Attacks That Used Gaddafi-Supplied Semtex and Weapons*, HC 49 (London: House of Commons, May 2, 2017).

Palestine—General Command, support may have been provided using that connection.<sup>53</sup> The regime may have also sent weapons and money to groups as diverse as the FARC in Colombia and Islamist rebels in the Philippines.<sup>54</sup>

### *Shifting Relations with Europe*

From 1970 to 2000, the Gadhafi regime either carried out acts of terrorism or funded international terrorist groups in almost every major Western European power. Although this terrorist activity clearly led to tensions, it did not lead to a cessation of relations, mainly related to the West's desire to access Libyan oil.<sup>55</sup>

Italy, for example, imported almost 22 percent of its oil from Libya in the late 1960s and the state oil firm, Eni, continued to operate in the country even after Gadhafi had expelled the final remnants of the colonial-era Italian population in 1970. When US and British oil firms lost their licenses after the 1986 US-led air attacks, Eni stepped in to expand its holdings and Gadhafi continued to use oil exploitation contracts to reward international allies and ensure the development of Libya's reserves.<sup>56</sup> But when Silvio

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53. CISAC, "Red Brigades," Stanford, updated June 20, 2012, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/red-brigades>.

54. "Colombian President Claims Gaddafi Supported FARC with Money," MercoPress, October 24, 2011, <https://en.mercopress.com/2011/10/24/colombian-president-claims-gaddafi-supported-farc-with-money>; and Tisdall, "Gaddafi."

55. Tobias Vanderbruck, "Gaddafi's Legacy of Libyan Oil Deals," Oil-Price.Net, October 21, 2011, <http://www.oil-price.net/en/articles/gaddafi-legacy-of-libya-oil-deals.php>.

56. Otman and Karlberg, *Libyan Economy*.

Berlusconi came to power in 1994, Italy radically expanded its ties with the regime.<sup>57</sup> Over the next decade, Libya invested heavily in the Italian stock market; bought 7.5 percent of UniCredit, the country's largest bank; and bought a large share in the Juventus football club. At the same time, Berlusconi was happy to welcome Gadhafi as an honored guest.

France was also reliant on Libya for oil (16 percent of its imports in 2011 came from Libya), but generally refrained from closer links. The French posture toward Libya changed when Sarkozy became president. French arms sales to the regime grew, leading to a flurry of state visits and declarations of public support.

Other European countries were more circumspect. Germany and others relied on Libyan oil very little and showed little interest in developing closer relations. Others, such as the United Kingdom, suffered directly from Gadhafi's sponsorship of terrorism, but after Gadhafi renounced weapons of mass destruction in 2003, the British government started to support the regime. The United Kingdom was prepared to arrest and deport Gadhafi's opponents and sell arms in return for lucrative oil deals. The oil and gas company BP benefited notably by being awarded a \$900-million exploration and development contract after 2006.<sup>58</sup> But both France and Britain turned on the regime after the Libya revolt of 2011 and have since sought to ensure their commercial interests in the aftermath of the revolution.

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57. Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents: 1980–2001* (London: Penguin, 2001).

58. Vanderbruck, "Gaddafi's Legacy."

## *Shifting Relations with the United States*

Like the United Kingdom, the United States had a difficult relationship with the Gadhafi regime. Until 1986, US oil companies continued to operate in the country, even after Libya had been designated as a state sponsor of terrorism in 1979. A trade embargo was put in place in 1986, which led to the regime canceling all US exploration rights. The embargo lasted until 2004, when US President George W. Bush repealed the sanctions. Soon afterwards, Exxon signed a major contract to exploit Libya's offshore oil deposits, but, overall, US business interests in Libya remained limited when compared to British and French business interests.

## **THE FALL OF GADHAFI AND ITS CONSEQUENCES**

Gadhafi's improving international image did not remove domestic dissent. In 2006, a short-lived military coup in Benghazi occurred, and in 2008 and 2010, riots occurred over corruption and reduced living standards. And despite the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood and the LIFG, both managed to retain a presence in Libya, providing the opposition with an organizational base that was to prove essential when open revolt broke out in 2011.

### **Civil War**

In February 2011, a major revolt broke out and the eastern regions, especially Benghazi, overthrew their local governors. Following a UN Security Council decision to freeze Gadhafi's assets and an Anglo-French intervention, the revolt spread across

the country, leading to the collapse of the regime by August 2011.<sup>59</sup> Unfortunately, failure to plan for the postconflict phase meant the country has since fractured on geographical and tribal lines, despite multiple attempts to mediate a solution.<sup>60</sup>

Although placing the Libyan revolt in the context of the wider Arab Spring of 2011 is common, the reasons for the rebellion were essentially local and related to the regime's corruption and domestic policies.<sup>61</sup> The revolt also quickly took on a regional characteristic as it started in Benghazi in February 2011 and spread across the country. In response, those Western powers that had, until recently, courted Gadhafi removed their support. The UN Security Council imposed sanctions on the regime's elite and referred members of the regime to the International Criminal Court. As the fighting spread, the UN created a no-fly zone and authorized member states to use all necessary measures to prevent further attacks on civilians.

Briefly, the regime seemed to regain control, especially of Tripoli at the end of February, and offered a cease-fire partly mediated by the AU. At the same time, violence against the civilian population escalated, and by early March, the regime seemed as though it might win the immediate military struggle. A NATO-led intervention halted a pro-government offensive toward Benghazi, and an uneasy international coalition maintained both a no-fly zone (under NATO control) and ground strikes on Gadhafi's forces (under

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59. House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *Libya*.

60. Blanchard, *Libya*.

61. Larbi Sadiki, "The Arab Spring: The 'People' in International Relations," in *International Relations of the Middle East*, ed. Louise Fawcett (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 324.

the control of a wider international coalition that included some NATO members and air units from the Gulf Cooperation Council states).

The leadership of the Transitional National Council was acknowledged as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people in May 2011 by various states, including the United Kingdom and the United States, and by Turkey in July 2011. The regime made several offers of a cease-fire and a peaceful transition, yet NATO and its allies escalated its campaign by sending some ground troops and dropping weapons and supplies to rebel areas. Tripoli fell to the rebels on August 21–22, and by September 22, only Sirte, Bani Walid, and Al Fuqaha remained under regime control. Gadhafi was killed on October 20, 2011, after his forces lost control of Sirte.

The end of the regime did not bring peace. Due to disinterest and poor planning, the Western powers did little to restore governance, and the country fragmented into small areas held by various local militias.<sup>62</sup> In places, a single group ran a town, but Tripoli was effectively under the control of several competing groups as well as the remnants of Gadhafi's supporters. By 2013, militias controlled the various oil refineries and were selling oil on the black market as production dropped from 1.4 million barrels a day in late 2012 to just 160,000 barrels a day. Benghazi and Cyrenaica pushed for independence, and US Ambassador John Christopher Stevens was murdered in September 2012 at his residence in Benghazi as

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62. Patrick Cockburn, "Special Report: We All Thought Libya Had Moved On—It Has, but into Lawlessness and Ruin," Independent, September 3, 2013, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/special-report-we-all-thought-libya-had-moved-on-it-has-but-into-lawlessness-and-ruin-8797041.html>.

radical Islamists attacked the US embassy to expand their power.

The Transitional National Council scarcely survived the fall of Gadhafi as the country splintered on regional and ethnic lines, with local militias seeking to secure oil revenues. This chaos created ample space for insurgent groups like AQ and ISIS to flourish.

## **Postconflict Governance**

After the fall of Gadhafi, Libya splintered along the lines of its historical subdivisions and according to the militias or tribal groups that dominated in towns and regions. By 2015, the GNA was agreed to by the main factions and included the Tobruk-based HoR, the Tripoli-based GNC, and the Tripoli-based Libya Dawn militia groups, which were closely aligned to the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>63</sup> Although these groups were notionally committed to this process, progress stalled over disputes about the jobs and functions that should be allocated to each group. The HoR is unwilling to give up its control over the Libyan military, although groups aligned with the GNC have generally become more supportive of the GNA process. Equally, the HoR has de facto control of the regions containing most of Libya's oil industry. Additionally, the LNA, backed by the UAE and Egypt and led by ex-Gadhafi general Khalifah Haftar, carved out its own area of control in eastern, central, and southern Libya and stands outside the GNA framework.

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63. Giorgio Cafiero and Daniel Wagner, "The UAE and Qatar Wage a Proxy War in Libya," HuffPost, December 14, 2015, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-uae-and-qatar-wage-a-\\_b\\_8801602](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-uae-and-qatar-wage-a-_b_8801602).

By late 2017, four groups held power in different regions of Libya. The notional government, the GNA, had some power in Tripoli, but this was contested by both Libya Dawn and smaller militia groups operating in roughly the same area. The HoR controls the bulk of the oil industry around Tobruk, and the LNA sits outside the GNA's control with a power base in the east and south. The situation is complicated by the foreign sponsorship of each faction. Egypt and the UAE originally backed the HoR and, more recently, the LNA, while Qatar and Turkey have supported the GNC and Libya Dawn.<sup>64</sup> This international involvement has led to charges and countercharges among the various Arab states as to their respective goals, funding of terrorism, and promotion of the breakup of Libya.

## **External Involvement**

During the civil war, foreign intervention started with French, British, and US attacks on Gadhafi's troops and was initially designed to stop further attacks on civilians. Other powers were also involved, leading to the creation of a wider Libya Contact Group consisting of the United States, France, Great Britain, Italy, Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait, and Jordan. The Libya Contact Group was used to coordinate air strikes designed to weaken the regime, a more aggressive response than required by the UN resolution. Of the non-NATO members, Qatar and the UAE initially

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64. Karim Mezran and Elissa Miller, "With ISIS on the Brink of Defeat, Is Trump Planning a Surge in Libya?," *Newsweek*, July 13, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/isis-brink-defeat-trump-planning-surge-libya-636226>.

provided humanitarian assistance in Benghazi, and the UAE offered some direct military support.<sup>65</sup>

Postconflict, the initial response of the Western powers was to step back and repeat the errors that marred the Iraq War; this included excessive optimism about the simplicity of moving from an authoritarian regime to a stable, representative form of government.<sup>66</sup> Western timidity seemed to be driven by a desire not to convert military intervention against the old regime into a long-term commitment to rebuilding Libya. In many instances, Western policy was driven by an overly optimistic hope Libya would transition from dictatorship to something akin to the limited democracies of some of the Gulf States in a short period, with the only issue being the allocation of new business contracts. The enduring problem of the refugee crisis and the presence of ISIS finally forced a reengagement, with the main goal of stopping refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea into Italy. But in the meantime, postwar Libya had fragmented.

This fragmentation, as noted, is partly on geographical lines, partly reflecting an ideological split between the Muslim Brotherhood and Sanusiyah-inspired movements and partly reflecting the conflicts among the various external states now involved. The dispute between Qatar, the UAE, and

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65. Guma El-Gamaty, "Qatar, the UAE and the Libya Connection" Al-Jazeera, June 12, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/06/qatar-uae-libya-connection-170612080219306.html>.

66. Mattia Toaldo, "Europe's Options on Libya: No Easy Way Out," European Council on Foreign Relations, March 2, 2015, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/europes\\_options\\_on\\_libya\\_no\\_easy\\_way\\_out311250](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/europes_options_on_libya_no_easy_way_out311250); and House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *Libya*.

the Saudis extends beyond the borders of Libya, adding to the complexity of the situation. The Qatari-Emirati conflict (with the Saudis backing the UAE) mirrors similar disputes in Syria and Yemen as well as tensions between gulf-region powers.<sup>67</sup> Adding to the external forces in the country is the determination of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's government in Egypt to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from establishing a hold in Libya.

The role of Qatar has been particularly controversial. Along with other Arab states, Qatar sent humanitarian aid to help the anti-Gadhafi forces rather than the military intervention favored by the UAE.<sup>68</sup> Even so, Qatar fully backed the rebels, even when their chances of success seemed limited, and supplied oil, food, and much-needed medicine to Benghazi in the aftermath of the uprising in February 2011. Qatar's willingness to intervene was welcomed by the NATO countries involved because it represented substantial direct assistance at a time when they felt constrained by the dynamics of the UN Security Council, the UN mandates, and domestic concerns. According to a Reuters report, Qatar's primary goal was to gain control over the export of Libyan oil and gas and use this to coordinate with its own production (in effect, to give Qatar more leverage within the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries).<sup>69</sup> But Qatar has characterized its engagement with the Tripoli-based

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67. Simeon Kerr and Katrina Manson, "Trump Points Finger at Qatar over Terror Financing," *Financial Times*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/995989b6-4a8a-11e7-919a-1e14ce4af89b>.

68. Dmitry Zhdannikov et al., "Special Report: Qatar's Big Libya Adventure," Reuters, June 9, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-qatar/special-report-qatars-big-libya-adventure-idUSTRE75826M20110609>.

69. Zhdannikov et al., "Special Report."

GNA as backing the peaceful process of helping the UN-supported government.

The greater dispute between Qatar and the Saudis has two basic causes. One is Qatar's willingness and desire to normalize relations with Iran, with which it shares some oil fields, rather than the direct confrontation preferred by Saudis.<sup>70</sup> Also, the Qataris have backed traditional Islamist groups, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood, at a time when the Saudis, the UAE, and the new Egyptian regime are determined to stamp out any emerging brotherhood power base.<sup>71</sup> In supporting the GNA, the Qataris have funded elements within the brotherhood-affiliated Libya Dawn movement and retained close links with the Cyrenaica-based HoR.

The Qataris are almost certainly funding Islamist groups within Libya.<sup>72</sup> Qatar has had links with members of the Islamist LIFG, which had already publicly repudiated AQ and its basic ideology.<sup>73</sup> Qatar has been accused of doing more than just funding its proxy factions, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, in a complex and divided dispute. Qatar has also been accused of directly funding ISIS in Libya.<sup>74</sup> Little independent evidence of this support has been found, but some Libyan officials with links to the LNA have made regular claims Qatar has provided direct funding

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70. Zhdannikov et al., "Special Report."

71. Nicola Pedde, "The Libyan Conflict and Its Controversial Roots," *European View* 16, no. 1 (June 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-017-0447-5>.

72. Khajil Ajdoud, "Qatar's Sabotage Approach in Libya," *Asharq Al Awsat*, May 31, 2017, <https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/khalil-wld-ajdoud/features/qatars-sabotage-approach-libya> (site discontinued).

73. Blanchard, *Libya*.

74. Kerr and Manson, "Trump Points Finger."

and facilitated the transfer of ISIS fighters from Syria to Libya. Adding to the confusion, US President Donald Trump recently praised Qatar for tackling the funding of terrorism only a few months after he endorsed the Saudi claims Qatar was funding ISIS.<sup>75</sup>

At an organizational level, a clear distinction exists between the old LIFG and AQ or ISIS, although many individuals have shifted loyalty according to the perceived dominance of each group. Equally, individual Libyans have been active in many recent attacks in Western Europe, including attacks in the United Kingdom in 2016 and 2017. Qatari support for individuals involved in the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood or the LIFG means such individuals are also funding groups that have close links to people who have carried out attacks for ISIS. Having links with ISIS is not the same as directly funding it, but it does indicate a lack of concern for the consequences of the group's dispute with the UAE and the Saudis.

Although the Qatari government might seek to differentiate between its support for groups aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood and non-Salafi radical Islamism, not all private citizens do so. Again, as in Syria, evidence has been found private individuals from various gulf countries, including Kuwait, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, have funded extremist groups with their own funds. External involvement, whether by a state or by rich, private individuals, only undermines the creation of a competent government in Libya and leaves open an opportunity for ISIS or AQ to stage a comeback.

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75. Josh Lederman, "Trump Extols Qatar on Anti-Terror, Reversing Past Critique," Associated Press, April 10, 2018, <https://apnews.com/7dec03bc5b8148278a9f4dd42b3adba0>.

Politically, the central issue in the UAE-Qatar dispute (and how it applies to Libya) is support for the Muslim Brotherhood rather than ISIS. The UAE is determined to eradicate the group and was quick to send aid to Egypt after Mohamed Morsi's overthrow in 2013.<sup>76</sup> Little doubt remains that after it failed to stop Libya Dawn from seizing Tripoli through air strikes, the UAE broke the UN arms embargo and directly armed groups the country believed shared its concerns.

For example, the UAE backed Egyptian attempts to bring General Haftar's LNA to power, including air strikes on his opponents, despite his opposition to the UN-backed government. Haftar had served under Gadhafi until he defected in the late 1980s after the military defeat in Chad. He is accused by other factions of seeking to restore the Gadhafi regime, albeit without the inconvenience of the Gadhafi family. Thus, Qatar accuses the UAE of seeking to destabilize the country as part of the UAE's intention that no Islamist groups be involved in the government. The UAE and Egypt are supporting, arming, and funding the only main faction in Libya that is openly opposed to the GNA. With its external backing, the LNA became a potent military force but lacked wider appeal, and its attempt to capture Tripoli in late 2019 failed.

## **THE RISE OF ISIS**

### **Al-Qaeda in Libya**

After the 2011 civil war, Libya was left without a functioning government and splintered into small

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76. Cafiero and Wagner, "The UAE and Qatar."

units ruled by various tribal and militia groups. Not surprisingly, AQ sought to exploit the situation.<sup>77</sup>

The existing links between the LIFG and AQ are complex. At the level of organization and core ideology, the two groups differ in important ways, not least of which is the LIFG drew on the Sanusiyah movement that had dominated Libya and the Sudan in the nineteenth century rather than the Saudi-based Wahhabi and, later, Salafi beliefs.<sup>78</sup> At a practical level, the LIFG leadership did not share AQ's belief the far enemy (the United States) was the prime target; LIFG saw its struggle as one to remove Gadhafi's regime and install an Islamist government in Libya.

Nevertheless, ex-members of the LIFG have moved to join AQ affiliates in other countries, especially as AQ was creating a network of groups across North Africa under the rubric of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib.<sup>79</sup> This subgroup was formed in 2006 as part of the evolution of AQ's strategy after it lost its bases in Afghanistan and brought together Islamist groups in Algeria, Morocco, and sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>80</sup> Al-Qaeda had originally sought to cooperate with the LIFG, and although some individuals from the LIFG worked with AQ, their presence in Libya was limited. Consequently, prior to 2011, AQ only had a small network in Libya using the Ansar al-Sharia label. During and after the uprising, this group operated in a manner similar to the Syrian group the Al-Nusrah

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77. House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, Libya.

78. Gambill, "The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)."

79. John C. K. Daly, "Libya and Al-Qaeda"; and Daniel L. Byman, "Libya's Al Qaeda Problem," Brookings, February 25, 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/libyas-al-qaeda-problem/>.

80. CISAC, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb."

Front to Protect the Levant. Ansar al-Sharia sought to cooperate with other Salafi groups sharing key elements of its ideology, rather than insist on total acceptance of AQ's fundamental beliefs.

Estimates suggest by 2012, AQ had some 300 members in Libya spread between Darnah, Sirte, and Al Kufrah, but with more influence among the other militias than these raw numbers would imply. By this stage, AQ probably had absorbed the element of the LIFG that remained committed to violent jihad. But in turn, AQ was to be overtaken by a new rival.

### **ISIS in Libya**

The general strategy of AQ after the collapse of its efforts in Iraq in 2006 was to try to work with the wider collection of jihadist movements, even if these movements had significant differences in practical goals and ideology.<sup>81</sup> But ISIS, AQ's former franchise in Iraq, drew very different lessons from this defeat and decided it could tolerate no independent Sunni movements in territory it controlled. After ISIS rose to power in northern Iraq and came to dominate much of northern and eastern Syria by 2014, the group was seen as the dynamic new leader of global jihad. Along the way, the group absorbed former AQ networks as well as individual militants.<sup>82</sup> Ironically, a movement that started by rejecting AQ's enduring focus on the far enemy (the United States) in favor of gaining power in Iraq and Jordan, ISIS became a global movement in its

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81. Daniel L. Byman and Jennifer R. Williams, *ISIS vs. Al Qaeda: Jihadism's Global Civil War* (Washington, DC: Center for the National Interest, February 24, 2015).

82. William McCants, "How Zawahiri Lost Al Qaeda," *Foreign Affairs*, November 19, 2013, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/somalia/2013-11-19/how-zawahiri-lost-al-qaeda>.

own right as it spread from Iraq and came to dominate the wider Salafi-jihadist movement.<sup>83</sup>

The Islamic State entered Libya to take full advantage of the chaos after the revolt of 2011. As in Syria, the group rejected the option of cooperating with other Salafi groups and instead tried to impose its own agenda and organization. The Islamic State's enemy was as much other Islamist movements as the competing government forces.

The UK-based Quilliam think tank translated an ISIS document that described its initial strategy in Libya.<sup>84</sup> To create a substantial cadre of militants, ISIS tried to build up its presence in part by stopping the flow of Libyan fighters to Syria and by fusing with some local militia groups that were sympathetic to ISIS's goals, which were

- treating Libya as a new province of the caliphate;
- easing the pressure on the Syria/Iraq province, partly because it could reach both into Saharan Africa and across the Mediterranean; and
- gaining access to military supplies that could be used to fuel other conflicts, such as the one in Mali.

Although the ISIS document identified Libya as an important target, it also suggested the group faced a limited time frame in which it could consolidate its control. The Islamic State's first presence in Libya was a base in Darnah in January 2013.<sup>85</sup> This base was used

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83. Peter Beaumont, "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: The ISIS Chief with the Ambition to Overtake Al-Qaida," *Guardian*, June 12, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/12/baghdadi-abu-bakr-iraq-isis-mosul-jihad>.

84. Winter, *Libya: The Strategic Gateway*.

85. Toaldo, "Europe's Options on Libya."

for multiple attacks, including the murder of Western tourists carried out by Tunisians who had returned home from working in Libya and the beheading of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians. The latter crime briefly led to a discussion of joint military action between Egypt and Italy, but other EU nations and the United States insisted on diplomatic actions and even maintained the existing arms embargo on the Libyan government, leading to the collapse of the Italian-Egyptian initiative. The EU and the United States were unwilling to intervene despite ISIS's provocations because they feared ISIS would be able to exploit the presence of Western troops to generate additional support for its cause.<sup>86</sup> Both Britain and France remained overly optimistic a stable government would be established, leading to rapid economic development.<sup>87</sup>

The Islamic State then established a presence in multiple coastal towns—mostly the same towns AQ had earlier infiltrated—particularly Sirte. The group took over the existing AQ network as it had in Syria by accepting AQ militants who had swapped allegiances. The overlap of ISIS and AQ from the perspective of individual militants appears important. Individual jihadists seem more willing to join the group or local Salafi organization that is deemed to be the most successful, so fighting for their version of Islam is far more important than the exact organization for which they fight.<sup>88</sup> This willingness to join the most successful organization has important implications for the events

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86. Toaldo, "Europe's Options on Libya."

87. House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *Libya*.

88. Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (February 2013): 1–15.

that might occur once ISIS is effectively defeated in a given territory or region. As long as poor governance, corruption, and real grievances exist, some form of extremist jihadist movement will seek to exploit the situation.

For a period, ISIS was poised to dominate the country, as the group looked to take advantage of existing conflicts and imposed its own violent rule over the territories it controlled. Despite the lack of a strong Libyan government, ISIS's grip on Libya was never as secure as its control over parts of Syria. One major reason was a lack of local manpower. Few foreign fighters went to Libya, and most active ISIS militants were those already based in North Africa or those with personal connections to Libya.

The Islamic State's approach led to its isolation, even among other jihadist groups, and the funding sources in Libya were less secure than in Syria. The Islamic State's brutality and sectarian approach provoked several local backlashes, and it briefly lost Sirte in late 2015 before regaining control of the city in early 2016. At that stage, ISIS had an estimated 1,500 fighters in the city, significantly more than AQ in 2011, though after the United States began a campaign of air attacks, ISIS's numbers in the city dropped to around 1,000 fighters by August 2016.<sup>89</sup> The drop probably indicated both losses in combat and the exodus of militants to other regions in North Africa.

The evidence indicates funding for ISIS in Libya, even at the height of its power, was tight

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89. Spencer Ackerman, Chris Stephen, and Ewen MacAskill, "US Launches Airstrikes against ISIS in Libya," *Guardian*, August 1, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/01/us-airstrikes-against-isis-libya-pentagon>.

and unreliable.<sup>90</sup> The Libyan group's early funding came from the core group in Iraq and Syria and was supplemented by stealing the reserves from the Central Bank of Libya (originally stolen by the local AQ franchise). Some members were able to retain their stipends provided by the GNC before they defected to ISIS. The Islamic State also taxed the earnings of the remaining state-paid officials in Sirte. But ISIS was not able to move beyond extortion from an impoverished community as the group failed to capture any oil or gas production. The organization also lacked a ready buyer; no regional state played the role for ISIS in Libya that Turkey had in Syria. A further drain on the group's funds was the decision to divert substantial funding to linked groups in the Sinai region.

At this time, ISIS had not yet taken control of revenues from the gangs involved in people smuggling and the drug trade due to its lack of manpower.<sup>91</sup> This situation was unlike ISIS's preferred operating approach and left other criminal and political movements active in territory it controlled.

Despite these constraints, by late 2015, ISIS had control over multiple cities along the coast and in the sub-Saharan region. If the group had problems with manpower and funding, it still appeared to be dominant, as external military attacks were piecemeal and episodic.

## **THE FALL OF ISIS?**

As in Syria, all the evidence shows ISIS overreached in Libya. The group's sectarian approach to other

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90. James Roslington and Jason Pack, *Who Pays for ISIS in Libya?* (Oslo: Hate Speech International, 2016).

91. Roslington and Pack, *ISIS in Libya?*

groups alienated potential allies, and its framing of any struggle as being only about its aims has reduced popular support. As in Syria, the group was vulnerable to external military pressure. One way ISIS was able to survive in its strongholds was by exploiting the wider disputes about the governance of Libya. Although the other factions in Libya were threatened by ISIS for taking part in the GNA framework, they stood to make political gains if ISIS was defeated by their own forces; this meant the final battles against ISIS were as much a struggle for relevance between the potential victors as an effort to drive ISIS from Libya.<sup>92</sup>

### **Loss of Sirte**

By 2016, ISIS was in retreat due to a combination of pressure from the main domestic Libyan factions, renewed US and NATO attacks, and loss of support from other Islamist factions in the country. Initially, as the group lost ground, the risk of outright conflict loomed among the HoR, LNA, and GNA, especially over Sirte.<sup>93</sup> But conflict was avoided when combat units loyal to the GNA took Sirte in mid-2017 and the remaining ISIS fighters fled south.<sup>94</sup> Even more than for AQ, the occupation of territory was a very important part of ISIS's global appeal and underlies its relative dominance among the wider network of jihadist groups.<sup>95</sup> The loss of its bases in Syria, Iraq, and Libya represented a major loss of face for ISIS.

But dispersion carries threats as well. Many of ISIS's militants in Libya came from other North African

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92. Blanchard, *Libya*.

93. Blanchard, *Libya*.

94. Lewis, "Islamic State Shifts."

95. Ibrahim, *Radical Origins*.

countries, either as workers during the Gadhafi period or to fight after 2011, and many of them have returned to their home countries and are not easy to track. Evidence of this dispersion exists. Some recent terrorist attacks in Tunisia seem to have been carried out by individuals returning from Libya.<sup>96</sup> In addition, former ISIS members are not the only terrorists Tunisia has to worry about: The AQ-oriented al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib has become entrenched in the mountains in the south along the Algerian border.

Since 2016, ISIS has suffered further setbacks in Libya, limiting its control to portions of a few desert towns.<sup>97</sup> As a result, the group may have merged again with the remnants of the original AQ network in the country. But other reports suggest the two groups remain separate, with AQ continuing its strategy of focusing on local disputes in an attempt to gain a foothold by seeking local alliances, especially as its wider al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib franchise has mostly remained loyal and has a presence in Tunisia, Algeria, and the Saharan regions.<sup>98</sup>

As it retreated, ISIS also changed its funding strategy. Instead of its traditional practice of demanding payments for the use of roads and

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96. Daniel L. Byman, "Libya's Al Qaeda Problem"; and Carlotta Gall, "Tunisia Fears the Return of Thousands of Young Jihadists," *New York Times*, February 25, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/25/world/europe/isis-tunisia.html>.

97. Adam Nathan, "ISIL 'Regrouping in Southern Libya with Support of Al-Qaeda and Preparing for Further Attacks,'" *Daily Telegraph*, March 1, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/03/01/isil-regrouping-southern-libya-support-al-qaeda-preparing-attacks/>.

98. Rhiannon Smith and Jason Pack, "Al-Qaida's Strategy in Libya: Keep It Local, Stupid," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017): 191-200.

transportation links, it came to embrace extracting revenue from criminal activities, especially from drugs and people smuggling.<sup>99</sup> The ability to extort from criminals and the plentiful supply of weapons suggest the group has the capacity to retain a presence and potentially find a new route back to prominence.

## **The Remaining Threat**

Individual ISIS fighters may simply shift to AQ supporting groups, or ISIS may find a means to maintain its presence in Libya. The latter would be particularly dangerous because Libya remains fragmented, despite further peace talks, leaving ISIS ample scope to take advantage of Libya's enduring problems. The following are aspects of the remaining threat in Libya:

1. The Islamic State has created a network in the country, partly following the original AQ presence, that allows it to move its base to another district within the country.
2. As in Iraq, ISIS has apparently made an alliance with the remnants of the previous regime's security network; this may give the group the means to infiltrate the weak state structures being set up and make it difficult to eliminate.<sup>100</sup>

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99. Colin P. Clarke, "ISIS Is So Desperate It's Turning to the Drug Trade," RAND Corporation, July 25, 2017, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/07/isis-is-so-desperate-its-turning-to-the-drug-trade.html>.

100. Cyril Widdershoven, "ISIS Libya Foothold Threatens EU," ES Updates, *Journal of Energy Security*, February 26, 2016, [http://ensec.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=592:isis-libya-foothold-threatens-eu&catid=131:esupdates&Itemid=414](http://ensec.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=592:isis-libya-foothold-threatens-eu&catid=131:esupdates&Itemid=414).

3. The refugee crisis is another ready source of funding. Extracting money from migrants who are fleeing war, poverty, and persecution is an easy way to fund the group's operations. In addition, this funding mechanism opens another route by which the group can send militants to Europe, especially now that the option to move between Syria and Turkey is limited.
4. Either unintentionally—as its fighters fled defeat around Sirte—or as a deliberate policy to disperse its militants across North Africa, ISIS sent its cadres from Libya to other states.<sup>101</sup> Because the group built up its strength in Libya by preventing North African militants from traveling to Syria, many of these fighters are probably from nearby countries, such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria.
5. Finally, Libya is awash in arms.<sup>102</sup> The Islamic State can use this resource to arm itself or to sustain conflicts across North Africa and into sub-Saharan Africa. The group could exploit plenty of extant regional conflicts, giving it the scope to cause chaos across a vast region.

For example, ISIS could exploit the Tuareg's belief they are being oppressed, especially in Mali, Niger, and Chad. The Gadhafi regime had a record of intervention in these conflicts—in particular, the civil

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101. Jack Moore, "As ISIS Flees Sirte in Libya, Tunisia Faces Greater Threat from Returning Jihadis," *Newsweek*, November 27, 2016, <https://www.newsweek.com/2016/11/25/isis-flees-sirte-libya-tunisia-faces-greater-threat-returning-jihadis-513719.html>.

102. Francesco Strazzari and Simone Tholens, "'Tesco for Terrorists' Reconsidered: Arms and Conflict Dynamics in Libya and in the Sahara-Sahel Region," *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 20, no. 3 (February 2014): 343–60.

war in Chad.<sup>103</sup> Given the links between ISIS and parts of the Gadhafi regime, the practice of exploiting these networks has probably been passed down to ISIS.

Haftar's delicate relationship with Salafi groups, which have a similar ideology to that of ISIS, must also be a point of consideration. The renegade general has thousands of Madkhali-Salafi militiamen under his control. Haftar's manpower shortages have allowed the groups to gain increasing prominence in parts of Libya under the LNA, even away from the battlefield and in the LNA administration.<sup>104</sup> In the event of a total LNA collapse, these groups could give ISIS a boost. Ideological overlap would provide opportunities for fighters to move between groups, and radical shifts in either direction could destabilize the security situation in the country.

In recent years, ISIS detainees have been repeatedly used for their political capital by all sides in the Libyan conflict. Militias affiliated with the GNA are believed to hold some 400 ISIS prisoners in facilities in and around Misratah. The militias have indicated an inability to hold the prisoners securely in the event of further offenses by the LNA or a collapse of GNA ranks. Some militia members are believed to be high-ranking members of ISIS's Libya franchise. Any policy moves must seriously consider detainees to prevent the undoing of hard-won gains against ISIS. Dozens of groups across Libya currently have captured ISIS

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103. Devon Douglas-Bowers, "The Crisis in Mali: A Historical Perspective on the Tuareg People," *Global Research*, February 1, 2013, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/the-crisis-in-mali-a-historical-perspective-on-the-tuareg-people/5321407>.

104. David D. Kirkpatrick, "A Police State with an Islamist Twist: Inside Hifter's Libya," *New York Times*, updated April 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/world/middleeast/libya-hifter-benghazi.html>.

members under their control, potentially giving the groups leverage, especially with international actors such as the United States and the EU. If ISIS fighters are to remain off the battlefield, then these groups may need to be accommodated. But policy makers must be wary of reports of detainee numbers, which may be inflated.

## **THE RESPONSE OF THE UNITED STATES**

One frustration of US policy makers was the EU and European members of NATO neglecting to take the lead on Libyan reconstruction and security, which most likely will not happen because they fear sustained intervention and the issue of refugees has become entangled in the domestic politics of most EU states. Italy is most directly affected by Libyan turmoil because it is the main destination for refugees fleeing across the central Mediterranean, has some colonial links to Libya, and has made sustained efforts to mitigate the refugee crisis. Other EU states have provided some funding to help Italy with this burden, but, like the United Kingdom, tend to frame the issue as one of stopping migration across the Mediterranean, rather than providing safe passage. Though only briefly, Italy was prepared to take more direct action against ISIS in conjunction with Egypt before backing down under pressure from other EU states and the United States.<sup>105</sup>

Thus, without direct US leadership, the situation in Libya will most likely remain chaotic. The Islamic State has been driven out of Sirte and its other strongholds, but the situation will continue to offer the group opportunities. Libya remains a poorly governed

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105. Toaldo, "Europe's Options on Libya."

state with porous borders, copious stocks of weapons, and various sources of income ISIS can divert to its own coffers. The Obama administration was cautious about direct and substantial military intervention, in part because this might have provided ISIS with a cause and an easily reached enemy. The Islamic State may have also believed military intervention would derail the attempts to forge a government of national unity.<sup>106</sup> Regardless, US military operations proved to be critical in driving ISIS from Sirte and have made it more difficult for ISIS to reestablish a presence in the south of the country.

The Trump administration has offered several policies on Libya. At various stages in 2017, the Trump administration mooted partition of the country, suggested a US withdrawal at a press conference with the Italians, and proposed a return to a mixture of diplomatic pressure to force a political agreement in Libya and military help in the fight against ISIS.<sup>107</sup> Militarily, this shift in policy seems to be connected to a belief ISIS is on the verge of defeat, suggesting at least some promise for the long-term governance of Libya.<sup>108</sup>

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106. Blanchard, *Libya*.

107. Stephanie Kirchgaessner and Julian Borger, "Trump Aide Drew Plan on Napkin to Partition Libya into Three," *Guardian*, April 10, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/10/libya-partition-trump-administration-sebastian-gorka>; Stephanie Kirchgaessner, "Donald Trump Remarks Raise Fears of US Disengagement in Libya," *Guardian*, April 21, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/21/donald-trump-remarks-raise-fears-of-us-disengagement-in-libya>; and Barbara Starr, "US Military Considers Ramping up Libya Presence," CNN, July 10, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/10/politics/trump-us-military-libya-strategy/index.html>.

108. Mezran and Miller, "ISIS on the Brink."

The important actors view the problems with Libya in different ways, creating conflict when identifying the overall problem. The European members of NATO tend to see the problem in Libya as a part of their wider issue with immigration. The Arab states are primarily concerned with the stability of the country and the management of various Islamic groups; the United States, although interested in security, leans more toward promoting its economic interests. Equally, Libya has become another region where Turkey and Qatar, who tend to be sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood, are at odds with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Sisi's Egypt.

Although France and Britain would most likely take the lead in their former colonies in response to a security crisis, such as the France-led intervention in Mali, this does not apply to Libya. The former colonial power, Italy, left as part of a wider military defeat and has no real residual presence beyond commercial links. Italy is perhaps the European state most directly affected by the crisis in Libya, but it does not particularly see current problems in Libya as something on which it should take the lead.

This strongly suggests the United States cannot leave the Libyan problem to the EU or the European members of NATO. Ideally, the United States would work with both European and other Arab powers to help the rebuilding process, but some sort of coherent US response is needed. As noted, different external powers may be funding their own proxy movements in Libya, delaying any progress toward sound governance.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Policy Options

The damage caused by the Anglo-French indifference after the fall of Gadhafi has left Libya with practically no government; rather, Libya has two competing power groups that mirror the historic divisions within the country.<sup>109</sup> By late 2016, the United States had lost patience with its European allies and used airpower and Special Forces to attack ISIS directly in its stronghold of Sirte.

But Libya offers ISIS far more than just a new region for its caliphate. On Libya's borders, the wider tensions between Muslim and Christian communities in the sub-Saharan region are long-standing and exacerbated by the relative discrimination against the Tuareg across the region. Gadhafi intervened in these crises and civil wars in the 1970s and 1980s, so a precedent for Libyan interaction with the region exists.

In turn, tensions in Saharan Africa are worsened by climate change reducing crop yields and intensifying disputes over access to water.<sup>110</sup> Conflict will continue or at least always be a possibility unless wider steps are taken to help sub-Saharan Africa manage its current problems. Without economic help, agricultural productivity will probably halve in the next decade in the region, triggering conflicts over the remaining sources of food and water. A report for the EU argued "for each dollar invested in safe drinking water, three

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109. House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *Libya*.

110. Any Freitas, "Water as a Stress Factor in Sub-Saharan Africa," *European Union Institute for Security Studies* 12 (2013).

to four dollars are generated, depending on the region and technology available.”<sup>111</sup>

Within Libya, ISIS may well prove to be a transitory movement, but radical Islamism has long had substantial influence. Although the Sanusiyah-inspired LIFG may have had ideological concerns about AQ’s Salafi mindset, individual militants found it easy to travel between the various groups. Radical Islamism in Libya was not imported by ISIS or AQ, and it will remain important in Libya even if those groups are defeated.

Framing the question of how to deal with ISIS in Libya as purely a localized matter needing the correct combination of military and diplomatic action is too limited an approach. Although ISIS must be removed from Libya, any response needs to take account of both Libya’s history and aspirations and the extent to which the dynamics in Libya are connected to wider issues across North Africa.

The Islamic State’s brief period of relative dominance was underpinned by militants drawn from across the region. At the height of its power, the group was able to divert funds to support the extremist groups operating in southern Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula, where a wider Berber demand for better treatment was taken over by ISIS, and the group has since diverted its militants to carry out attacks in Tunisia.

If the United States is serious about challenging ISIS in Libya and making progress in helping the country rebuild and remain autonomous, it must take the following steps:

1. The United States must assist Libya in rebuilding state structures and be aware of ISIS’s ability

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111. Freitas, “Water as a Stress Factor,” 2.

to infiltrate any emerging government. To accomplish these objectives, the United States should work with other Libyan groups opposed to Gadhafi and ISIS, regardless of whether their Islamist doctrine is palatable. The United States must remain aware tribal networks are not the only force in the new Libya.

2. The refugee crisis is both a potential source of revenue for ISIS and a way to send its militants into Europe. As long as the crossing of the Mediterranean is under the control of unscrupulous criminal gangs, it will remain a potential source of revenue. The United States must use whatever leverage it has in Europe to pressure the Europeans into establishing safe, official routes onto the continent for genuine refugees in need of asylum and aid Italy and the GNA in Libya to cope with the financial and logistical requirements of managing refugee flows.
3. Finally, ISIS and AQ are adept at manipulating genuine grievances for their own ends; as a result, attention needs to be paid to the range of conflicts across Saharan Africa. Nearly all of these conflicts can be exploited by ISIS, especially in regions where the conflict is also between Muslims and Christians, but all of these conflicts have their own local dynamics and causes. Seeking to defuse these grievances is a wider but necessary agenda for the United States, as well as the EU, and much can be done to prevent ISIS by helping the local administrations manage the increasing pressures created by climate change on water and food supplies, either with

humanitarian aid or by providing technological and logistical knowledge and resources.

## **Diplomatic Options**

Similar to the EU, the Obama administration was initially unwilling to intervene too directly in the military conflict against ISIS, preferring to pursue diplomatic initiatives to resolve the internal divisions that emerged after 2011. This approach was commendable, but it needed two key conditions to work. First, the process needed to be actively managed because the Libyan groups were unlikely to reach a compromise by themselves.<sup>112</sup> Second, the process needed to be closed-ended. The latter point is perhaps the key criticism that can be leveled at the various UN and EU attempts so far. As noted above, the GNA structure has been agreed in principle, but the problem lies in implementation.

The Trump administration should support the UN in ensuring a unitary government that holds the country together emerges as soon as possible. Achieving this objective would help to facilitate elections at the earliest feasible opportunity to determine once and for all the entity that holds democratic legitimacy. Indulging the GNA, which has little influence outside Tripoli or the HoR, in its desire to keep control of key institutions and facilities risks repeating the problems that blighted Yemen after unification in 1990 because the state would permanently fracture into competing power bases. In Yemen, unification brought a division of responsibilities along north-south lines and the creation of dual structures so that senior officials from

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112. Blanchard, *Libya*.

both states kept their jobs.<sup>113</sup> The short-term result was political and economic paralysis. In the longer term, this solution created the conditions first for the civil unrest between 2011 and 2012, and now for the civil war in the country. Libya must avoid these mistakes.

A related problem is, as in Syria, Libya is becoming an arena where the struggles between other powers are enacted. In recent years, the main focus has been on the Shia-Sunni conflict and how this is reflected, at a state level, as a fundamental antagonism between Iran and the Saudis. This focus has meant not enough attention has been given to the developing disputes between Sunni states, especially those among the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, and Turkey. These disputes have occurred partially for political reasons, as states seek to deal with groups they believe are linked to sources of domestic discontent. The Egyptians, since Sisi seized power, have supported the Benghazi-based HoR/LNA against the Tripoli-based GNA due to the presence of groups linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.

As a result, all states that are active in Libya need to back the formal UN process and an early plebiscite. Support for the GNA by the UN will not be unconditional because elements within the GNA clearly share the underlying Salafi views of ISIS and AQ, but the UAE, Russia, and Saudi Arabia continuing to sponsor the HoR/LNA would simply delay any return of formal governance to Libya. Now that the LNA's attempt to impose military dominance has failed, a return to some form of mediated political process is essential.

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113. Noel Brehony, *Yemen Divided: The Story of a Failed State in South Arabia* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

## **Military Options**

As a significant military threat in Libya, ISIS has been defeated. A combination of local efforts, international airpower, and Special Forces has forced ISIS to the southern margins of the country. Like any well-motivated terrorist group, ISIS has the capacity to withstand setbacks, and driving the group from its last bastions may require significant effort. The Islamic State's resilience suggests some military commitment within Libya, especially to provide the resources the local militias lack, is needed.

The more pressing requirement is linked to the need to ensure Libya can start to operate as a unitary state. To achieve this goal, in the short term, the UN arms embargo must be reimposed, and Turkey, the UAE, Russia, and Saudi Arabia must stop sending weaponry to the parties. Beyond these measures, the Libyan military needs to be placed back on a professional footing, and it needs to assist in the complex process of disarming local militias and ensuring the writ of the government is accepted across the country.

To avoid making the same mistakes that have been made in Syria and to repeat at least those aspects of the Afghanistan War that have been successful, the United States should be the sole agent providing the training and materiel for the new Libyan army so the country can control the army's membership and keep away known jihadists.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Islamic State's brief opportunity to establish territorial domination in Libya has seemingly passed. As in Iraq and Syria, the military defeat of ISIS occurred because it overreached and alienated all potential allies with its sectarian policies. But the West cannot be complacent because many ISIS members in Libya are former members of the AQ network, and many come from other North African countries. These members may well disperse across the region, which has no shortage of existing conflicts, or switch allegiance again to a new jihadist group.

Within Libya, the criminality that was unleashed with the fall of Gadhafi remains unchecked. The focus of this criminal activity, at the moment, is arms and drug smuggling and extracting wealth from the refugees flowing through the country. The Islamic State and AQ can fund themselves effectively, either by extorting the criminals or by taking a share of this criminal activity to sustain some presence in the country. At the moment, ISIS has been defeated in Libya, but its ideology persists. As long as the group can exploit real grievances or find sponsors in the struggles between external powers, it may be able to reestablish itself. And if not ISIS, then a successor jihadist organization may well rise out of one or another conflict in North Africa and the Middle East.

## APPENDIX

**Table A-1. List of names and groups**

General National Congress (GNC)	Broad Islamist movement based around Tripoli.
Government of National Accord (GNA)	Notionally the current government of Libya backed by the United Nations, Turkey, and Qatar.
House of Representatives (HoR)	Broad Islamist movement based around Tobruk.
Libya Dawn	A militia that emerged in the 2011 rebellion against Muammar Gadhafi. Libya Dawn took control of Tripoli in 2014 and has close links to the Muslim Brotherhood.
Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)	The principal Islamist opposition to Gadhafi during the period 1995–2010. Members had close links to al-Qaeda (AQ) but, as a group, it did not share AQ’s focus on international jihad.
Libyan Islamic Movement	Emerged in 2011, possibly with members who left the LIFG. The Libyan Islamic Movement is based near Tripoli and is part of the Libya Dawn militia group.

**Table A-1 (continued)**

Libyan National Army (LNA)	Having emerged in 2014, the LNA is backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Egypt as a counterweight to the growing importance of the GNA and GNC.
Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command	A Marxist group within the wider Palestinian movement. The group was funded by Gadhafi and may have been used by the regime to transfer weapons and money to other terrorist movements in Western Europe.
Sanusiyah	A form of Islam that appeared in Libya and the Sudan in the late nineteenth century. The Sanusiyah influenced the 1951–69 monarchy and the basic ideology behind the Islamist LIFG in modern-day Libya.
Transitional National Council	The umbrella group that led the opposition to Gadhafi during the Libya revolt of 2011.

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