Assessing the Islamic State in Libya

The current situation in Libya and its implications for the terrorism threat in Europe

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Contents

The so-called Islamic State (IS) in Libya has regained the spotlight in 2019, directing international attention to the restless country. Having been driven out of its stronghold in the coastal area of Sirte in late 2016, IS has become a point of reference in attempts by groups within the country to discredit those they are fighting, a way of identifying the enemy. The critical question now is "What is IS doing?" Is it an organisation in the process of "regrouping" and regaining strength, potentially even controlling territory? Or is it an uncoordinated bundle of individuals facing asymmetric threats that will always inhibit its local success? From this, additional questions arise: what are the implications for the terrorism threat in Europe, what with Libya being so close to European shores? These, among others, are the main questions this paper seeks to address.

Eight years have passed since the start of the February Revolution that culminated in the bloody overthrow of the Qaddafi regime in October 2011. Muammar al-Qaddafi had ruled Libya, supported by various alliances, for 42 years. Since his overthrow, initiated by local forces and supported by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the country has experienced almost a decade of turmoil.

In Libya today, structures are divided. These divisions are found markedly in the disputed political system but also pervade into the military formations and economic set-up of the country. Politically, the country is split into various institutions claiming legitimacy and exercising control in different regions. This division is impactful, given that the country has a territorial size eleven times that of neighbouring Tunisia, with large parts constituting desert terrain, and a population of only about six million people, just little more than half that of Tunisia.

As of April 2019, the Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli in western Libya and headed by Fayez al-Serraj is the only internationally recognised governing body. Despite low levels of legitimacy in the country, limited geographical reach, the lack of a loyal military and competing institutions like the parliament in the east of Libya (situated in Tobruk), the GNA has, up to this current period, been able to act as a Libyan government, particularly on the international stage.

The main defector and competing power player that has emerged is the self-declared General Khalifa Haftar, who is linked to the parliament in Tobruk. He was appointed Head of the Libyan National Army (LNA) or, in the more precise Arabic translation, the Libyan Arab Armed Forces.[1] Over the course of early 2019 and culminating in advances towards Tripoli in early April 2019, Khalifa Haftar and the LNA have begun to "take control" of Libya's southern region, breaching out from the group's eastern nucleus that it captured after violent fighting in the cities of Benghazi and Derna. On 4 April 2019, the LNA forces took the town of Gharyan, 100 km south of Tripoli before advancing to the city's outskirts. Shortly after, the LNA declared operation "Flood of dignity",[2] which deployed thousands of men and heavy artillery to the West with the stated aim

[1] *al-quwwāt al-musallaḥa al-ʿarabiyya al-lībiyya*. However, they promote themselves as Libyan National Army and are usually referred to by this name, especially by international commentators, as it sounds more inclusive for not emphasising the allegedly Arab character.

[2] "Libya: 'Our army is coming to you' - LNA forces advance on Tripoli", LNA spokesperson al-Mismari, 6 April 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3_uArUx4po

of capturing the capital and "eradicating terrorism". The GNA proclaimed the counter-offensive "Volcano of anger", spearheaded by a group of loosely-aligned militias. Whilst to some extent caught by surprise, the military groups in Tripoli were relatively swift in arranging defensive mechanisms, and even fraternising following the counter-mobilisation of western Libyan forces.

Previously, high hopes were pinned on the United Nations (UN)-brokered "National Conference", scheduled for 14-16 April 2019, which was supposed to gather all key stakeholders and lay the groundwork for inclusive elections and a move towards a political solution. However, there has always been doubt about the willingness to change the current system in light of the people that benefited from the *status quo*. With the LNA's latest moves, the chances for a peaceful transition and compromises appear even lower. At the time of writing, the military offensive on Tripoli has turned into a stalemate with constant shifting skirmishes on the outskirts of Libya's capital.

In general, the economic development, like the political development, remains hostage to the military developments, most significantly the LNA advances. The persisting but frail operational status – which can be described as an elite bargain – between the two rival administrations in the eastern and western parts of Libya, combined with their economic interdependence, are in peril as a result of the latest power moves by Haftar.

Such is the context for this paper. It assesses the strength of IS in Libya, with a subsidary focus on the implications for security in Europe. The study examines the activities of IS in Libya on the ground between March 2018 through March 2019, as well as its European incursions. In pursuit of this objective, two sets of research questions will be raised. Firstly, why does IS have an interest in Libya and how does that manifest itself? And secondly, what are the previous linkages between IS in Libya and the attacks in Europe, and what is IS's future in Libya given the concurrent security implications for Europe? The paper will consider existing grievances in Libya, the security vacuum(s) and Libya's geographical appeal.

An understanding of the overall situation in Libya is relevant for this paper, as well as for the assessment of the security threats originating from Libya. IS does not operate in a vacuum but rather manoeuvres strategically, trying to capitalise on local opportunity structures.

1. IS Interests in Libya

a. The Bigger Picture

For IS the notion of enhancing its footprint via media output to signal its strength after territorial defeats is vitally important for its survival and continued appeal. Some analysts argue that it is even more important than it is for other terrorist groups as "propaganda production and dissemination is at times considered to be even more important than military jihad".[3] The imperative of conducting (small-scale) attacks and keeping media operations running is part of its well-known slogan of "Remaining and Expanding".[4] Therefore, even after the expulsion from Sirte, IS has had an interest in maintaining its presence in Libya by erecting checkpoints, committing abductions and disseminating propaganda referencing IS activity in Libya via its *al-Naba'* newsletter,

[3] Charlie Winter, *Media Jihad: The Islamic State's Doctrine for Information Warfare,* International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 13 February 2017, https://icsr.info/2017/02/13/icsr-report-media-jihad-islamic-states-doctrine-information-warfare
[4] Mina al-Lami, *Where is the Islamic State group still active around the world?*, BBC Monitoring, 27 March 2019, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-47691006

previously also *Dabiq*[5] or propaganda videos in order to defy the image of alleged defeat.

b. The Libyan Environment

In addition to IS's interest in countering their territorial losses in Libya (following additional losses in Iraq and Syria), the situation is fertile and attractive to IS's organisational strategy. First, different parts of Libya have faced a security vacuum that has fluctuated and been impacted by local developments, as well as foreign interests and interventions. While re-examining the rise of IS in the city of Sirte in 2015, one finds that the key alliances the group formed with some elements of the disgruntled tribes, along with its brutal tactics, were crucial to IS's success. Sirte, which had originally counted among the least well-off in the country, had been one of Qaddafi's favoured cities due to linkages with his own heritage and tribal background. As his home region and last refuge, the city resisted for months despite uprisings in other parts of the country. It was here that Qaddafi had focused attempts to consolidate the support and loyalty of the population. As a result, the local population in Sirte displayed long-lasting loyalty to Qaddafi (which is unsurprising given the economic interests tied to the survival of his regime). In the months and years that followed the dismantling of a decade-old entrenched, totalitarian political and economic structure – with additional anarchical features installed by Qaddafi – the post-2011 political trajectory of Libya was burdened with immense hurdles, such as the transition to a more inclusive system. One of the regions that felt the most disenfranchised was Sirte.

Similar processes of converting local grievances into opportunities fed into IS's attempts at expansion in other parts of the country. This included IS members aligning with local smugglers in the south of Libya, as well as capitalising on the pitfalls of Tripoli's militia security arrangement.[6]

With Libya's future standing at a critical crossroads right now, it is likely that opportunities similar to those in 2015, will re-emerge, and IS will once again get the chance to expand.[7] A harbinger of this forlorn outlook is the track record of IS activity since early April 2019, when Khalifa Haftar started his offensive on Tripoli. While IS has lost territorial control in Syria and Iraq, it has never vanished in Libya, even though it does not exercise governing duties in a demarkated territory. With the LNA and powerful militias in western Libya occupied with fighting one another, IS will naturally try to use this to its advantage with an uptick in attacks serving as a warning. At the same time, the widespread presence of a plethora of other violent actors in Libya also means that structurally IS will be perpetually constrained by other armed factions in the country – and while most jihadi groups differ in their aims and social composition, they compete for similar recruits.[8]

A second reason why IS has an interest in establishing a presence in Libya is the country's advantageous location, which facilitates the recruitment of fighters from sub-Saharan Africa. Simultaneously and more in the mid- to long-term perspective, the LNA's campaigns that are characterised by human rights violations may provide IS with an opportunity to capitalise on social fissures and perpetuate instability. IS in Libya is

[5] See, for example, *Dabiq*, no. 11 (9 September 2015). The issue includes a three-page interview (p. 60-63) with the "Delegated Leader for the Libyan Wilāyāt", in which he justifies and excuses IS's losses against Salafi-jihadi forces in the city.
[6] Alaa al-Idrissi and Wolfram Lacher, "Capital of Militias: Tripoli's Armed Groups capture the Libyan State", *Small Arms Survey Briefing Paper*, June 2018, http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-SANA-BP-Tripoli-armed-groups.pdf
[7] Hassan Morajea and Benoit Faucon, "In Libya, Islamic State Seeks Revival in Gateway to Europe", *Wall Street Journal*, 17 September 2017, http://www.wsj.com/articles/in-libya-isis-seeks-revival-in-gateway-to-europe-1505678113
[8] Lydia Sizer, "Libya's Terrorism Challenge: Assessing the Salafi-Jihadi Threat", Middle East Insitute, 2017, http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PP1_Sizer_LibyaCT_web_0.pdf

dominated by non-Libyans and therefore created the impression that the movement has spread and is active in Libya but is not "of Libya".[9] Although the highest number of foreign recruits came from neighbouring Tunisia, sub-Saharan fighters from a number of different African countries are important for IS in Libya.[10] The importance of Libya on account of its geographical location has been elaborated in January 2015 by an obscure Libyan IS member called Abu Irhim al-Libi in his work "Libya: The Strategic Gateway for the Islamic State," in which he explains that "Libya looks upon the sea, the desert, mountains, and six states: Egypt, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Algeria and Tunisia … It is the anchor from which Africa and the Islamic Maghreb can be reached."[11]

It is likely that similar opportunities like in 2015 will emerge again and, hence, Islamic State will get the chance to expand again.

Furthermore, Libya has exhibited a rampant availability of weaponry since 2011, with the situation becoming exacerbated in recent years due to inconceivable but well-documented breaches of the UN arms embargo.[12] In general, the porous borders resulting from the non-existent national state authority – which already under normal circumstances would face challenges in controlling the borders of an extraordinarily large territory – allows for local actors to negotiate the terms of border management. Unsurprisingly, their agenda and interests are often not defined by a national, communal objective but rather group-based incentives. In addition, and again linked to Libya's fractured political landscape, the country contains large streches of deserted no-man's land, with border crossings set up by LNA forces and other militias, signalling the competition between Libya's rival governments in the east and west.

Lastly, in terms of ideological proneness, Libya is not characterised by a sectarian divide that could be exploited by Sunni extremists, as is the case in Iraq, for example. However, widespread grievances amongst different parts of the population due to either frustration of a lack of opportunities, feelings of exclusion or fears of potentially inimical armed groups offer a breeding ground for extremist recruitment.

After having outlined some key characteristics of IS interests in Libya, the next section will move to the centrepiece of the paper, namely analysing the current status of IS in Libya which will provide the basis for the following threat assessment.

2. Current Status of IS in Libya

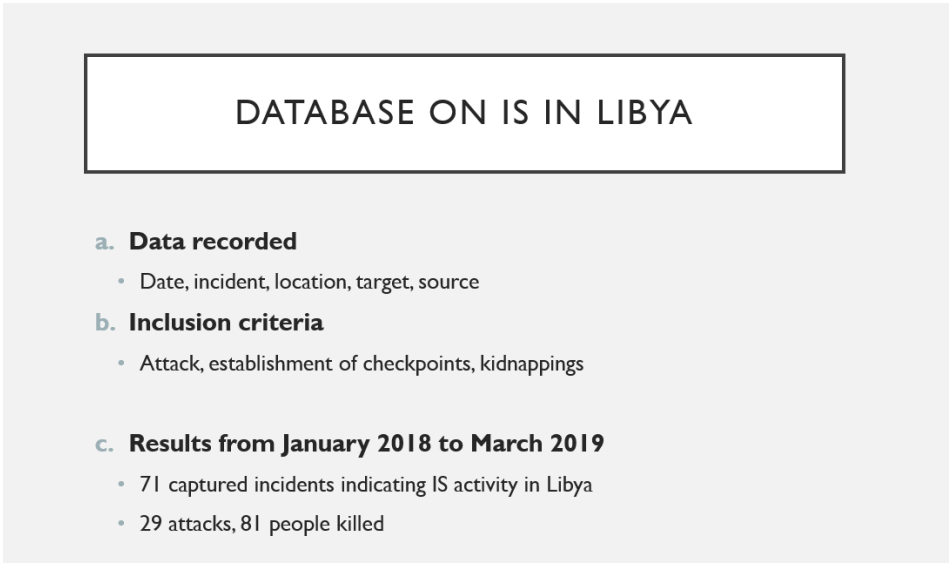
This section will outline the data collection process, provide an overview of the dataset, describe the focus of the study, and then explain how I approached the task of data analysis.

The assessment of IS's current strength in Libya is predominantly derived from the interpretation of a database that has been maintained since January 2018. This data has

[9] Lachlan, Wilson and Jason Pack, "The Islamic State's Revitalization in Libya and its Post-2016 War of Attrition", CTC Sentinel, March 2019.
[10] Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Others: Foreign Fighters in Libya", The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, 2018, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/PolicyNote45-Zelin.pdf
[11] Quoted in ibid.
[12] UN Panel of Experts on Libya, "Final report of the Panel of Experts in accordance with paragraph 14 of resolution 2362 (2017)", 8 September 2018, http://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1970/panel-experts/reports

been collected by regularly consulting open source-based research tools, such as Twitter Search API and IS-related search words in English and Arabic. The data collection period assessed for purpose of this paper was 1 March 2018 until 31 March 2019.[13]

While the database is mostly based on open sources, it was cross-referenced, and the information double-checked with closed information or local sources before it was added to the database. This multi-source approach ensures reasonable reliability of the research results.



As *Table 1* shows, during the 13-months data collection period, a total of 71 incidents were recorded in the database. A total of 29 IS-affiliated attacks were noted with a count of 81 IS-inflicted fatalities. These IS-affiliated attacks range from 'high-profile' attacks, such as the assault on the High National Election Commission (HNEC) on 2 May 2018 in Tripoli that caused 11 deaths, including the two suicide bombers; to low-profile, but often more frequent attacks, such as one incident in southern Libya on 23 November 2018, when IS members launched an assault on the town of Tazirbu, resulting in the death of 8 people.

Next to IS-affiliated attacks, the database records 26 accounts of the IS movement aiming to signal presence and strength by erecting checkpoints. Prototypical for this type of activity are, for example, the movements in early October 2018, when IS members erected mobile checkpoints south of its previous stronghold, the coastal city of Sirte, along the Qasr Abu Hadi-Waddan road.

The third and final category of incidents included in the database are IS-affiliated kidnappings. The sixteen kidnapping occurences recorded targeted civilians and armed

[13] During this period, all Twitter posts were collected that claimed IS activity in Libya in the following regards: (1) Attacks attributed to IS; (2) Establishment of checkpoints attributed to IS; and (3) Kidnappings attributed to IS. Reversely, this means many (claims of) IS activity were not included in the database, most markedly among them: (1) Arrests of alleged IS members; (2) Assassinations or releases of alleged IS members; (3) Release of propaganda material by IS; (4) Rumours of alleged IS and al-Qaeda cooperation; (5) Failed IS attacks (which are prominently featured especially on LNA affiliated Twitter accounts). The decision not to include 'Release of propaganda material' in this database, which might help to indicate IS's strength on the ground in Libya, is based on the fact that a) the origin of for published propaganda material is often difficult to determine and b) propaganda by definition is a means with which groups willingly exaggerate their stature. However, a brief assessment of the material will be included in later parts of the paper as certain features indicate idiosyncracies of IS in Libya and its strategy. Given the study's focus, retweets picking up (alleged) IS acitivity were not included. Comments on the (alleged) IS activity, however, were considered in the analysis.

factions, such as the kidnapping of two LNA officers, when they were attending a social gathering in the desert area near Waddan on 26 June 2018.

Collection Period	1 March 2018 - 31 March 2019
Total incidents	**71**
Attacks	29
IS Movement	26
Kidnappings	16

Table 1: Data overview

In terms of geographical distribution, an interesting picture emerges: the incidents are almost evenly spread between the eastern, western and southern regions of Libya[14] with a slightly higher number in the western part of Libya due to IS's focus on Sirte and the Sirte Basin. Overall, the database records 27 incidents in the western region, 21 in the southern region and 23 in the eastern region with the type of attacks being equally spread among the three regions. In the western part, Tripoli suffered all three 'high-profile' attacks in 2018 – on the HNEC in May, on the National Oil Corporation in September as well as on the Foreign Ministry in December.

The analysed data creates the impression that, at the current stage, IS is not aspiring to control territory in populated areas in Libya, but rather aims to create insecurity in all parts of the country. IS established or attacked checkpoints, raided and occupied inner-town police stations and kidnapped local notables for potential prisoner exchanges or ransom on several occasions. In addition, the group carried out the aforementioned three major attacks in 2018. It also tried to take control of parts of the Mabruk oil field, signifying its determination to find sources of income and consolidate its presence in the country. The overall aim in all parts of the country has been to generate a feeling of insecurity and distrust in the existing structures, dominated by the GNA in the west, the LNA in the east, and the LNA and regional tribal structures in the south. The startling attacks in Tripoli targeted key institutions of Libyan politics. With regard to the attack on the HNEC, it can be said that the prospect of a democratic procedure like national elections has attracted the attention of potential spoilers, the 2 May attack by IS's Tripoli province being a prime example.[15] These interruptions of the country's political developments that IS is able to achieve generate a feeling of insecurity regarding the political processes and dissatisfaction with government services, such as the provision of security.[16]

The lingering instability in Libya in general – a country close to Europe's coast line – carries many risks for European security with tangible spill-over effects. These include migration influxes, which carry human security implications as well as mid- to long-term societal reverberations. With regard to the terrorist threat to Europe, it emanates almost exclusively from IS. Other Salafi-Jihadi groups in the country do not seem to pose a threat to Europe in the same way IS does. This assessment is based on the answers to the research questions underlying this paper (*Figure 1*).

[14] The division is based on the historic origin of Libya as a body composed of three regions: Tripolitania in the west, Cyrenaica in the east and Fezzan in the south.
[15] BBC Monitoring on Twitter, 2 May 2018, https://twitter.com/BBCMonitoring/status/991686100799381504
[16] International Republican Institute's (IRI) Center for Insights in Survey Research, *Libya Poll*, 15 May 2019, http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/libya_poll_january_2019.pdf

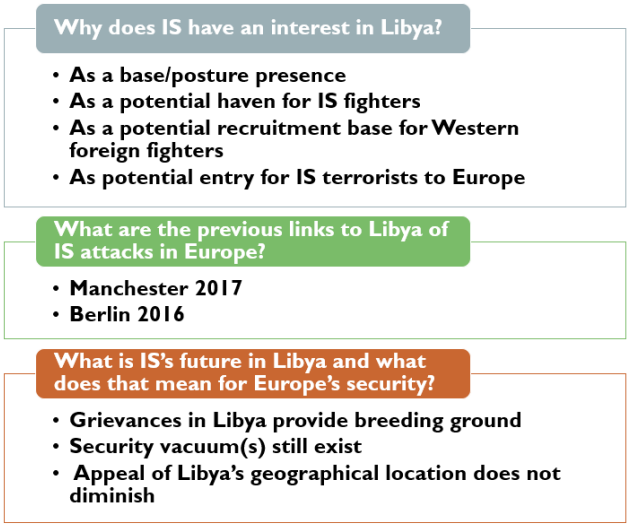


Figure 1: Summary of answers to research questions

Using the data collected via open source research methods, this paper has sought to identify and compare the scale of attacks, as well as the organisational backbone of the activity.

The qualitative analysis focused on two features. First, the number of fighters involved: whether it seemed to be a small group of always the same people. And secondly, the geographical location of the incidents: whether IS in Libya is concentrated in one area or spread around the country.

On the one hand, the number of 71 incidents in total with 81 IS-inflicted casualties (civilian and military) in a 13-months period is relatively insubstantial compared to the overall situation in Libya. For example, in May 2018 alone, the United Nations Support Mission to Libya (UNSMIL) recorded 47 civilian casualties inflicted by other armed factions in clashes in Derna, Benghazi, Kufra, Sabha and al-Zawiya as well as the IS attack in Tripoli.[17]

Further to this, the database exhibits continuous IS activity in the country dotted with three high-profile attacks in Tripoli over the course of 2018. The group, thus, continues to harbour aspirations to increase its visibility by perpetrating attacks on symbolic targets that send strategic messages in line with the group's ideology.

In the current third wave of the civil war – triggered by Haftar's offensive – that has riddled Libya since 2011, IS is not the issue at stake. However, the group survived after it was expelled from Sirte and has been able to assert itself in a context of widespread conflict and violence (like the latest escalation). Europe is almost immediately affected by developments in Libya and, if Haftar is not contained, Libya will tumble, once more, into violence. Overall, the instability in western Libya is similar to the one experienced in 2014, as the fighting might continue in the future even if Haftar's offensive is averted. This uncertainty could once again strengthen terrorist groups like IS, which

[17] United Nations Support Mission to Libya, "Human Rights Report on Civilian Casualties - May 2018", 1 June 2018, https://unsmil.unmissions.org/human-rights-report-civilian-casualties-may-2018.

carried out a spate of attacks in Libya in 2018 and has already succeeded in capitalising on its current momentum.[18]

This overview shows that IS in Libya has not vanished but rather manifests itself via a) noteworthy attacks on institutions connected to the state and b) less prominent but more frequent activities in desert regions.[19]

This two-pronged strategy is harmful to progressive political and institutional developments that aim at Libyan state-building since it jeopardises the already volatile political process.[20] In addition, the presence and activities of IS in Libya have been repedeatly exploited by military actors, such as Khalifa Haftar, who lump together adversarial forces and denounce them as IS terrorists.[21] In the second Libyan civil war of 2014, Haftar re-emerged, installing himself and his LNA as a committed "anti-Islamist" fighting force. This narrative of "Islamist forces" and "terrorist forces" fighting "anti-Islamist" or "liberal" forces in Libya – with Haftar leading the latter group – has been criticised and proven untenable by many analysts over the last years. While there have been occasions on which the LNA was fighting jihadi groups, the narrative is still simplified.[22]

IS in Libya needs to be interpreted as one branch of a bigger group with its base in the Levant that, while exhibiting local idiosyncracies, is still tied to a bigger idea. Therefore, IS in Libya employs a double strategy, since it must, on the one hand, show that it implements IS's ideologically driven objectives (i.e. destroying *kufr* or unbelief in the form of high-profile targets) and, on the other, remain a relevant force in the country, safeguarding its base in this geographically advantageous position. For example, the attack on the HNEC in May 2018 was claimed by IS first via its *Nashir News Agency* media outlet on the messaging application Telegram. In a follow-up statement, IS emphasised that the attack in Tripoli was a response to a recent message from the group's central leadership urging attacks on election targets, referring to the April 2018 speech of the IS's spokesman.[23]

[18] Inga Kristina Trauthig, "In Libya IS has never vanished now with #LNA and powerful western militias occupied with fighting one another, #IslamicState will naturally try to use it to its advantage: Attack in Fuqaha yesterday serves as a warning", 9 April 2019, https://twitter.com/inga_kris/status/1115532785631027200

[19] Lachlan, Wilson and Jason Pack, "The Islamic State's Revitalization in Libya and its Post-2016 War of Attrition", CTC Sentinel, March 2019

[20] It is important to mention however that the GNA and the Presidential Council (PC) were established after major political and military factions in the west and south of the country agreed on their formation in Tripoli in March 2017. These processes took place relatively peacefully without triggering large-scale violent incidents and the various groups have worked with the international community on the fight against the Islamic State and illegal migration. See Virginie Collombier, "Libya: Moving beyond the transitional mood", Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping Geopolitical Shifts, regional Order and Domestic Transformations, *Future Notes* no. 11 (April 2018), http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_fn_11.pdf. However, while there has been initial progress in countering IS, such as forcing it out of Sirte in December 2016, the bridging failure of an inclusive deal deepened the prevalent political division separating the deal's supporters from its opponents and, additionally, led to the spread of new fractures within both factions.

[21] "Widespread use of 'Daeshi' in Libya began sometime between 2013 and 2015, when the Islamic State began carrying out operations in the country. In its current usage, it is often employed against anyone who opposes General Haftar and the LNA, falsely conflating any opponents with Islamist extremists." Jacqueline Lacroix et al., "Social Media and Conflict in Libya: A Lexicon of Hate Speech Terms", PeaceTech Lab in cooperation with Development Transformations and Elbiro Foundation, June 2019, p. 8, http://ww.peacetechlab.org/libya-lexicon

[22] Frederic Wehrey, "Quiet no more", Carnegie Middle East Centre, 13 October 2016, https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64846

[23] "Islamic State spokesman says 'battle has just begun'", BBC Monitoring, 23 April 2018, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1dp3x67

3. Relevance of the Findings

a. Libya's Geographical Importance

Overall, the IS terrorist threat originating from Libya is two-fold due to Libya's status as a key transit country for migration to Europe. Firstly, IS has identified the potential to infiltrate the migrant pathways into Europe and exploit this illegal entry point in order to enable radicalised individuals to perpetrate attacks in Europe on its behalf or engage in other subversive activities, such as distribution of propaganda or collection of funds. Secondly, IS in Libya possesses almost imminent access to often vulnerable people in the south of Libya (mostly migrants on their way to Europe), a potential on which it can capitalise to recruit fighters but also possibly radicalise parts of the population.

Main Points:

1	Migrant routes from Libya as a potential entry point to Europe.
2	Proximity to sub-Saharan Africa acting as a potential recruitment facilitator.
3	Libya's current security situation and its implications for the potential threat for Europe of IS in Libya.

b. Libya as a Transit Country with proximity to sub-Saharan Africa

Libya's geographical location in North Africa, in conjunction with bordering sub-Saharan Africa and displaying a vast coastline to the Mediterranean Sea, while not the only factors, are decisive in leading Libya to become a transit country for migration into Europe.

Looking at previous terror attacks in Europe, it is clear that IS has exploited migration paths into the continent, although the exact extent remains difficult to determine. While the infiltration of migrant flows was successfully undertaken by IS, the scale of terrorist infiltration, as far as that can be traced, seems to remain less than one percent of the total number of recent asylum seekers.[24] While the current evidence does not suffice to claim a systematic use of migration routes by terrorists, the concerns that some terrorists will continue to try to enter Europe are traceable both at the EU level but also among Libyan security officials convinced that IS is working with migrant smugglers.[25] For example, Alagie Touray, a Gambian national arriving in Messina, Italy, in spring 2018 and awaiting refugee status, seems to have been planning an attack in Europe. After his arrest in Italy, a video containing an oath of loyalty to the IS caliphate, recorded and sent via Telegram "to a series of recipients", was found.[26]

[24] Sam Mullins, *Jihadist Infiltration of Migrant Flows to Europe: Perpetrators, Modus Operandi and Policy Implications* (Palgrave Pivot, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-13338-2.
[25] Europol, EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2018, p. 28, http://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2018-tesat-2018; Christopher Livesay and Alexander Pavone, "ISIS Regroups to Attack a Fragmented Libya", PBS Newshour, 29 September 2018, http://www.pulitzercenter.org/reporting/isis-regroups-attack-fragmented-libya.
[26] Fiorenza Sarzanini, "Gambian affiliated to IS ordered to 'mow down' crowd", *Corriere della Sera*, 27 April 2018, http://www.corriere.it/english/18_aprile_27/gambian-affiliated-to-is-ordered-to-mow-down-crowd-b9f6ae02-4a29-11e8-a30a-134b88b5afda.shtml.

Two major IS terrorist attacks – the December 2016 lorry attack on a Christmas Market in Berlin (Germany) by Anis Amri, and the Manchester concert bombing by suicide terrorist Salman Abedi in May 2017 – have focused the attention on IS's activity in Libya. Both attacks were claimed by IS via its *Amaq News Agency*. The links to Libya are of different qualities: Tunisian Anis Amri received online instructional guidance and motivational support, while Salman Abedi, a UK citizen of Libyan descent, physically went to Libya, where he reportedly met IS members and received instructions in person. The fact that both cases link to Libya shows that IS has been able to establish an operational hub on Libyan soil that works towards connecting North African IS supporters in Europe.

Salman Abedi came to visit his father in post-Qaddafi Libya which gave him exposure to the jihadi scene in the country. The sixteen-year-old was most inspired by IS-styled jihadism. While in Libya, Salman met with IS members who were members of the IS unit *Katībat al-Battār al-Lībiyya* in Tripoli and Sabratha, as retired and current intelligence officials confirmed.[27] Therefore, the conclusion can be drawn that, although undeniable evidence that Salman underwent training in Libya is missing, the comparatively little time that passed between his return from Libya and the Manchester attack indicates that he received instructional guidance during his final trip to Libya.

In the case of Anis Amri, members of IS in Libya received the video in which he pledged allegiance to the IS leader Abubakr al-Baghdadi two months before the attack. His operational links were explained by Thomas Beck, head of the terrorism section of the German Federal Prosecutor's Office, when he described the person whom German authorities believe was Amri's "IS mentor". This individual sent him not only inspirational, ideological material, such as a document of over 100 pages with elaborate theological vindication for terrorist attacks, but also instructional guidance on recommended *modi operandi* for attacks, and more spiritual data, such as a *nashīd* or inspirational Islamic chant (reportingly sent in early December 2016).[28] The State Criminal Office of North Rhine-Westphalia also confirmed that Amri had been in contact with Tunisian IS members in Libya on Telegram.[29]

[27] Rukmini Callimachi and Eric Schmitt, "Manchester Bomber Met with ISIS Unit in Libya, Officials Say," *New York Times*, 3 June 2017, http://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/03/world/middleeast/manchester-bombing-salman-abedi-islamic-state-libya.html.
[28] Wortprotokoll aus dem Abgeordnetenhaus von Berlin, Ausschuss für Inneres, Sicherheit und Ordnung, 3 July 2017, http://www.parlament-berlin.de/ados/18/InnSichO/protokoll/iso18-010-wp.pdf.
[29] Florian Flade, "Was das LKA bei Amris Terror-Chat mitlas," *Welt*, 27 March 2017, http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article163180510/Was-das-LKA-bei-Amris-Terror-Chat-mitlas.html.

Figure 2: Photograph taken after the attack on the German Christmas Market on 19 December 2016.

One aspect that is often referred to in discussions of linkages of migration flows from North Africa or the Middle East to Europe is the potential of asylum seekers or "economic" migrants to radicalise over the course of their stay in Europe. However, these processes of radicalisation are heavily shaped by local circumstances in the countries of residence, rather than the status of IS in Libya, for example. Therefore, this paper refrains from elaborating on these challenges. At the same time, it remains difficult to exclude a concerted outreach by IS to migrant communities in Europe. It is noteworthy, however, that cases such as the one of Anis Amri have shown that radicalisation on European soil can occur mostly as a result of contact with terrorist groups close to "home" – in his case, the Libyan groups of IS that were able to communicate and connect with him using a familiar language and the perception that they share similar grievances.

When considering how the described dynamics might play out in the future, it is critical to acknowledge that the geographical attractiveness of Libya for terrorist groups like IS will not vanish, nor will its strategic location between sub-Saharan Africa and Europe. Therefore, and even though there have been previous crackdowns on the migrant smuggling business in Libya, the opportunity structures are likely to continue to be exploited, and hence, Libya's importance will remain. Jihadis have already been using these routes to traffic weapons, and they might enhance their skills and expand their operations by focusing on recruiting persons to support these activities.[30]

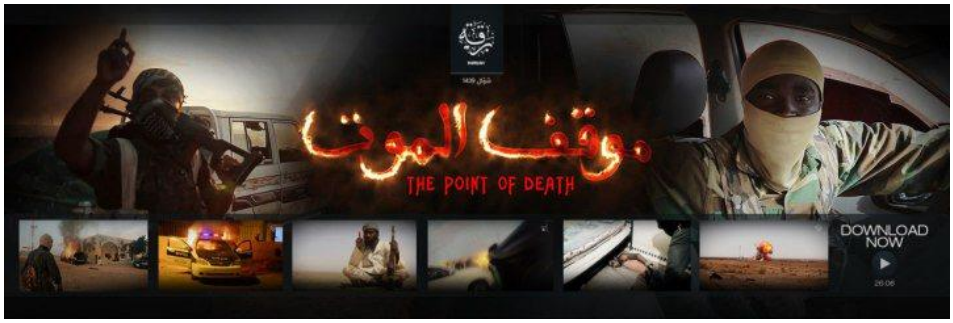
Main Points:

1	Libya is and most likely will remain a transit country for migration to Europe.
2	IS has been able to establish an operational hub on Libyan soil which works towards connecting exiled North African IS supporters in Europe.

[30] Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Others: Foreign Fighters in Libya", The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, 2018, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/PolicyNote45-Zelin.pdf.

IS in Libya has been upscaling its recruitment efforts regarding migrants of sub-Saharan origin and has seemingly proven successful at it. While fighters from sub-Saharan Africa have been crucial for IS in Libya from the start, especially as foot soldiers,[31] as of 2018, appeals directed at this group to join IS have increased.

With IS in Libya, for the first time East and West Africans have engaged in foreign fighting abroad instead of fighting with local insurgencies or terrorist groups. In early July 2018, IS's branch in eastern Libya, known as *Wilāyat Barqa* ("Cyrenaica province"), published a propaganda video with the title *Mawqif al-mawt* ("The Point of Death"), featuring noticeably sub-Saharan fighters (see below *Picture 1*). This was the first video from IS Barqa for almost a year, with the last one released in September 2017. In addition, IS published multiple eulogies in mid-August 2018, one of which was dedicated to Abū Mūsā al-Kīnī (featuring a photo of an IS member possibly of sub-Saharan origin, allegedly from Kenya, see below *Picture 2*). In this case, not the mere fact of having Kenyans among their members is noteworthy, but rather the fact that he was considered prominent enough to be eulogised in the "Caravans of Martyrs", which for IS is an honour not many fighters receive. Therefore, IS in Libya seems to have identified sub-Saharan Africans as a pivotal recruiting pool for the group's survival and strength. This seems to belie reports of Libya acting as a safety net or safe retreat for IS fighters trying to flee Syria and Iraq. Possibly, Libya is difficult to reach and too unattractive a territory for a great number of IS members. Instead, the IS presence in Libya continues to be defined by recruitment in neighbouring countries with an emphasis on its southern neighbours.



Picture 1: The Point of Death

Picture 2: Eulogy

It is likely that many of those currently fighting for IS in the south of Libya did not come to Libya with that aim, but rather because they were hoping to reach Europe. However, once in the paws of IS in Libya, these individuals might radicalise and potentially board a migrant boat to Europe one day, after being indoctrinated with IS ideology and having experienced fighting alongside IS fighters in Libya.

[31] Ibid.

c. Libya's Insecure Future

Looking at Libya as a whole, the ongoing Libyan political crisis has created a security situation in which hybrid state and non-state actors are vying for power which constantly creates opportunities for allegiance shifting due to emerging grievances (next to practical opportunities like benefiting from pre-existing migrant routes). As a result, also IS in Libya has managed to maintain its activities and some cells in the country.

The current situation of Libya is that of a divided country lacking a national political apparatus with a loyal military under civilian oversight. Instead, militias dominate most parts of the country, often catering for their own interests but caring little about the population as a whole. The often-cited remarks of former UN Special Envoy to Libya Martin Kobler that IS was the only functioning government in Libya, are to be taken as a warning, because the conditions under which IS was able to flourish in Libya have not changed drastically. Finally, and as is the case in Iraq and Syria, as long as there is a market for non-state actors to offer protection and livelihoods to vulnerable populations, jihadist groups will continue to radicalise and recruit, and sometimes benefit from *ad hoc* recruitment of individuals or groups seeking protection and livelihood without a preceding process of radicalisation.

Main Points:

1	The ongoing Libyan political crisis and divisions provide a security situation from which IS benefits.
2	IS re-emerged after its territorial defeat in Libya.
3	International and regional interventions in Libya partially jeopardise national reconciliation.

4. Conclusion

Globally, far fewer attacks associated with IS took place in 2018 than in previous years. Nevertheless, Europe needs to remain vigilant towards the continued intent of IS to perpetrate attacks on symbolic targets, as shown by the attacks on Easter Sunday 2019 in Sri Lanka. In Libya, IS continues to pose a threat. While the overall number of its fighters may have decreased, IS continues to operate in a wide-spread area in the country.

IS has established or attacked checkpoints, raided and occupied inner-town police stations, and kidnapped local notables for potential prisoner exchanges or ransom on several occasions. In addition, the group carried out three major attacks in 2018.

However, IS in Libya is – like any other actor in Libya – affected by local developments as well as foreign interventions. As it stands in spring 2019, the Libyan National Army (LNA) has pursued a fervent military offensive to "liberate" southern Libya from terrorists. The more successful the LNA groups are in penetrating southern Libya, the less ability IS will preserve to operate in the Fezzan. How these developments will play out is difficult to foresee. IS might relocate or enlarge its presence in the Sirte Basin again; IS fighters might shift alliances and find agreements with local players that let them stay in the desert area of the south of Libya for longer.

Simultaneously and more in the mid- to long-term perspective, the LNA's offensive could offer IS an opportunity to exploit social fissures and perpetuate instability. Even Qaddafi's totalitarian ideology and his political system were never able to eliminate the influence of, for example, the local tribes entirely, never achieving full penetration

on the scale he had envisaged, thereby proving Libya's engrained local loyalties. Also, IS in Libya was shrewd in benefitting from lingering grievances, often originating in perceived (or actual) political isolation, a fact that explains the IS establishment in Sirte. For example, Qaddafi had favoured his tribe, the Qadhadhfa, in Sirte and expanded its influence into Tripoli over powerful established tribes such as the Warfalla, who have long-standing linkages also to Benghazi and Bani Walid (next to Sirte).[32]

The described threats underline the importance of security cooperation between Europe and African states. For example, the G5 Sahel, which is concentrated on the five countries of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger,[33] will be vital in identifying potentially radicalised migrants stuck in Libya, and repatriating them back to their home countries.

Lastly, the strength of IS in Libya with regard to its external operations capability cannot be determined unambigiously. However, the outlined traces of IS in European terror attacks capture the potential for online guidance as well as the exploitation of migrant flows into Europe.

In sum, the main findings of the paper are:

1	IS in Libya is employing a double strategy of attacking high-profile targets and being a disruptive force in all parts of the country.
2	IS in Libya has an interest in continuing to use Libya as a hub to connect with supporters in Europe.
3	IS in Libya has an interest in recruiting sub-Saharan Africans.
4	IS in Libya has been and will likely continue to exploit migrant flows from the country into Europe.

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