

Islamic State in Libya: From Force to Farce?

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The roots of Salafi-jihadi groups in Libya can be traced back to the 1990s when the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) developed into one of the biggest challenges to the repressive Qaddafi regime.

Hard-line Islamist militias were among the forces fighting Qaddafi in 2011, which prospered the longer the fighting continued and were aided by its particularly violent nature.

Newer Salafi-jihadi groups emerged in Libya that threatened the upcoming elections in 2012 and aimed to exert influence and impose their agenda.

Over the course of 2015, the area around Sirte rose to be IS's strongest province outside the core territory of Iraq and Syria.

IS's presence in Sirte was ended in December 2016 when the group was militarily defeated by Libyan forces under the umbrella of the al-Bunyan al-Marsous operation room, with US airstrikes from Operation Odyssey proving crucial for the Libyan ground offensive. Since then, IS in Libya shifted to become a refuge for IS forces under pressure in Iraq and Syria; a possible staging post to threaten Europe; and a network of sleeper cells waiting for the right opportunity to rise again.



Libya's geographical location will always remain attractive for groups such as IS because it facilitates the recruitment of fighters from sub-Saharan Africa, intersects with relevant trading and smuggling routes, and is close to the shores of Europe.

In a database maintained since January 2018, a total of 87 incidents were recorded, broken down into the three categories. A total of 40 attacks were noted with a count of 93 IS-inflicted casualties. Next to IS-affiliated attacks, the database recorded 30 accounts of IS activity aiming to signal presence and strength by erecting checkpoints. IS-affiliated kidnappings amounted to 17.

The current uncertainty in Libya could once again strengthen terrorist groups, including IS, which carried out a spate of attacks in Libya in 2018 and has tried to capitalise on the current momentum in May 2019.

IS in Libya has been shrewd in benefiting from lingering grievances, often originating in perceived (or actual) political isolation, a fact that explains the IS establishment in Sirte.

With no unifying, effective Libyan government and a susceptible lack of reliable law enforcement in most parts of the country, the militia heads often offer at least some sort of order, tailoring themselves towards a national audience and to outside powers (as immigration control partners or counterterrorism forces).