



Middle East Institute  
*Counterterrorism Series*

LYDIA SIZER

POLICY PAPER 2017-1

OCTOBER 2017

# LIBYA'S TERRORISM CHALLENGE

ASSESSING THE SALAFI-JIHADI THREAT





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# Libya's Terrorism Challenge

## Assessing the Salafi- Jihadi Threat

Lydia Sizer

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## ABBREVIATIONS

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AFRICOM	U.S. AFRICA COMMAND
AQIM	AL-QAEDA IN THE MAGHREB
B.D.B.	BENGHAZI DEFENSE BRIGADES
B.R.S.C.	BENGHAZI REVOLUTIONARIES SHURA COUNCIL
D.M.S.C.	DERNA MUJAHIDEEN SHURA COUNCIL
E.U.	EUROPEAN UNION
F.I.U.	FINANCIAL INTELLIGENCE UNIT
G.N.A.	GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL ACCORD
ISIS	THE ISLAMIC STATE
K.F.R.	KIDNAPPING FOR RANSOM
L.I.F.G.	LIBYAN ISLAMIC FIGHTING GROUP
L.N.A.	LIBYAN NATIONAL ARMY
MANPAD	MAN-PORTABLE AIR DEFENSE SYSTEM
MENAFATF	MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA FINANCIAL AFFAIRS TASK FORCE
MOJWA	MOVEMENT FOR ONENESS AND JIHAD IN WEST AFRICA
N.G.O.	NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION
U.A.E.	UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
U.N.	UNITED NATIONS

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# CONTENTS

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- 1 INTRODUCTION
- 2 MAPPING THE SALAFI-JIHADI LANDSCAPE IN LIBYA
- 9 DRIVERS OF SALAFI-JIHADI MOVEMENTS: PUSH AND PULL FACTORS
- 14 THE OUTLOOK FOR SALAFI-JIHADI MOVEMENTS IN LIBYA
- 16 CONSEQUENCES OF SALAFI-JIHADI PERSISTENCE
- 18 RESPONDING TO THE PERSISTENT SALAFI-JIHADI THREAT
- 21 FUTURE SCENARIOS
- 23 CONCLUSIONS
- 24 ENDNOTES

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## SUMMARY

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Salafi-jihadis have maintained an active presence in Libya due to a mix of push and pull factors. Historic participation in such groups, declining standards of living, the historical marginalization of minorities, and a pervasive sense of victimhood have all made Libya a ripe jihadi recruiting ground. Many Salafi-jihadis offer the status, salary, and services that the fractured state cannot provide. These movements can be diminished through investments like educational programs, aid to war-torn regions, demilitarization programs, and improved intelligence sharing by border officials in Libya's neighboring states. However, until the political crisis that has plagued Libya for over three years ends, there is little Libya's international partners can do to help confront these movements. And as long as the crisis continues, civil unrest will persist and institutions will remain weak. Such a scenario would provide the requisite chaos for the present Salafi-jihadi movements to flourish.

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## KEY FINDINGS

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- ◆ While most Salafi-jihadi groups hold differing objectives, they compete for similar recruits and occasionally collaborate.
- ◆ Libya's security vacuum is the single largest enabler of Salafi-jihadi activity.
- ◆ Groups that focus on territorial control, such as Ansar al-Shariah and ISIS, deliberately disrupt state infrastructure in order to peddle their own goods and services.
- ◆ Khalifa Hifter's rhetoric and tactics give Salafi-jihadis an existential threat to rally around and could make such groups attractive to disaffected members of more moderate Islamist groups.
- ◆ The optimal scenario for curbing the influence of Salafi-jihadi threats in Libya is the establishment of a unified state with growing, legitimate institutions.





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## INTRODUCTION

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One day after the Salafi-jihadi attack on the U.S. Special Mission in Benghazi in mid-September 2012, local residents crowded squares condemning the incident. Within the week, these protesters had expelled one of the groups responsible for the attack, Ansar al-Shariah's Benghazi branch, from the city.<sup>1</sup> Despite this popular rejection of Salafi-jihadi movements in Benghazi, Ansar al-Shariah and other groups gradually made their way back into the city, initiating an assassination campaign targeting police and military officials by early 2013.

Libya is a conservative society in which Islam plays an important role. This is true across the political spectrum from hardline Islamists to self-proclaimed secularists. Salafi-jihadis make up only a small minority of the Libyan population, yet they have wielded disproportionate influence since 2011.

Salafi-jihadi movements fall within a highly diversified and competitive militia landscape, including allies of the anti-Islamist general, Khalifa Hifter, as well as Islamist militias, tribes, and criminal gangs. Hifter has tried to tie rival militia groups to Salafi-jihadi movements to discredit them. For example, the Benghazi Defense Brigades contained anti-Hifter police and army personnel as well as hardline Islamists and anti-Hifter Benghazi residents.<sup>2</sup> Yet, Hifter and his allies have justified targeting this group by accusing them of working closely with Salafi-jihadi organizations, including the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (B.R.S.C.) and Ansar al-Shariah.<sup>3</sup> The Benghazi Defense Brigades officially disbanded in June 2017 after Hifter removed them from their base in the Jufra region.

The absence of functioning state institutions or an accountable military with a monopoly on the use of force has allowed Salafi-jihadi groups to exist in parts of Libya for decades. Other groups have flourished since the 2011 revolution.



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# MAPPING THE SALAFI-JIHADI LANDSCAPE IN LIBYA

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## LIBYAN ISLAMIC FIGHTING GROUP

**Current Status:** Formally disbanded (1995-2010)

**Area of Operation:** Predominantly eastern Libya, around Derna and Benghazi. Many former leaders are based in Tripoli today

**Leaders:** Abdel Hakim Belhadj (also known as Abu Abdullah al-Sadiq), Sami al-Saadi

**Fighter Size:** Always limited to only a few hundred members<sup>4</sup>

**Capabilities:** Many received training in Afghanistan during the Soviet-Afghan war and in Sudan from the Taliban and al-Qaeda; specialized in clashes with police forces and assassination attempts on Muammar al-Qaddafi

The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (L.I.F.G.) was a Salafi-jihadi movement that posed the most formidable threat to Qaddafi during his dictatorship. The L.I.F.G. contained many “Afghan Arabs” who fought alongside other global Salafi-jihadis in Afghanistan in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> The group attempted to assassinate Qaddafi multiple times in the 1990s before a regime crackdown that imprisoned many and forced others to flee to Britain.

Since 2007, however, many L.I.F.G. leaders have backed away from jihadism, even forming political parties, running in elections, and serving in government positions after 2011.<sup>6</sup> From 2007-2009, Qaddafi’s son, Saif al-Islam, engaged in talks with L.I.F.G. leaders; the result of which was the release of some 250 L.I.F.G. members after the group renounced violent jihad, and apologized to the Qaddafi regime.<sup>7</sup>

The L.I.F.G. officially disbanded shortly thereafter, but following the 2011 uprisings, some former L.I.F.G. leaders sought larger roles in Libyan politics and society. For example, the emir of the L.I.F.G., Abdel Hakim Belhadj, formed the al-Watan Party and unsuccessfully ran for office in the 2012 parliamentary elections.<sup>8</sup> The L.I.F.G.’s spiritual leader, Sami al-Saadi, separately formed the Umma Party, alongside fellow L.I.F.G. members Abdel wahad Qaid.<sup>9</sup> Qaid is the brother of the late senior al-Qaeda official Abu Yahya al-Libi, who was killed in a U.S. airstrike in Pakistan in 2012. He also served as a member of the General National Congress after 2012.<sup>10</sup> Other former members remained closely connected to Salafi-jihadi groups like Ansar al-Shariah.





## JAMA'AT NASR AL-ISLAM WAL MUSLIMIN

**Current Status:** Active since March 2017 as face of al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) in Libya, made up of Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoun, Macina Liberation Front, and the Saharan branch of AQIM. Many of these groups have been active in Libya since at least 2011

**Area of Operation:** Predominantly in Mali, but also southwest Libya

**Leader:** Iyad Ag Ghali

**Fighter Size:** Over 5,000<sup>11 12</sup>

**Capabilities:** Have used Libya as a base from which to launch attacks in neighboring countries, and as a source of arms and ammunition. Attacks on critical energy infrastructure, hotels, local and foreign security presences, including the U.N.; kidnap for ransom operations; infiltration of local smuggling routes

Al-Qaeda has had an influence on Libya since the 1990s. Although the L.I.F.G. never fully subscribed to the al-Qaeda ideology, there were individuals within Libyan society who did. Some of these individuals traveled to Iraq after 2003 to fight alongside al-Qaeda in Iraq. Umbrella groups for al-Qaeda affiliates in Libya have been constantly shifting since 2011—working flexibly with some of the militias that proliferated after that time to tailor their approach to the Libyan context and advance their goals.

AQIM's evolution since 2011 reflects the flexibility with which it operates in the ever-changing Libyan context. The regional al-Qaeda affiliate, AQIM, had been represented in Libya since late 2011 by Ansar Dine and al-Mourabitoun. Ansar Dine followed the leadership of AQIM Emir Abdelmalek Droukdal. Mokhtar Belmokhtar led al-Mourabitoun, created from the merger of Belmokhtar's al-Mulathamoun (the Masked Men Brigade) and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA) in 2013. Al-Mourabitoun also maintained a presence in Libya from which to launch regional attacks. Al-Mulathamoun—itsself created as an offshoot of AQIM in late 2012—was responsible for regional attacks on foreigners, including the In Amenas attack in January 2013. After 2015, AQIM re-merged with al-Mourabitoun. Reports that Belmokhtar was killed in an airstrike in Ajdabiya have not been confirmed.

Finally, in early March 2017, representatives from Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoun, the Macina Liberation Front, and the Saharan branch of AQIM released a video announcing their merger into the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin under the leadership of former Ansar Dine leader Iyad Ag Ghali.

These groups have integrated themselves in local communities including some components of the Tuareg minority group, although their persistent existence in southwestern Libya is mostly due to the security vacuum there. They have more recently participated in fighting in Benghazi since 2014. Most of their attacks, however, have occurred further south in the Sahel, sometimes using southwestern Libya as a staging ground.



## ANSAR AL-SHARIAH

**Current Status:** Active since 2011; Benghazi branch formally dissolved in May 2017

**Area of Operation:** Benghazi, Derna, Sirte, Ajdabiya

**Leaders:** Abu Khalid al-Madani (since January 2015)

**Fighter Size:** Over 5,000 members in 2012

**Capabilities:** Assassination campaigns targeting local police and military officers, as well as infrastructure; targeting foreign nationals; bank robberies; destruction of Sufi shrines; social service provision to local communities; imposition of sharia law in areas under their control; threatening democratic institutions and processes

Newer groups like Ansar al-Shariah affiliates in Benghazi, Derna, Sirte, and Ajdabiya have sought to carve out areas of influence since 2011. Ansar al-Shariah emerged from the consolidation of hardline Islamist militias in the 2011 uprisings, and sought to prevent Libyan participation in parliamentary elections in 2012. It has had connections to the Ansar al-Shariah branch in Tunisia. The leader of the Tunisian branch, Seifallah Ben Hassine, was the target of a U.S. airstrike in June 2015.<sup>17</sup> Ansar al-Shariah's Benghazi and Derna branches were listed as terrorist organizations subject to sanctions under U.N. Security Council Resolution 2253 (2015).<sup>18</sup> Since its establishment, Ansar al-Shariah has received support from AQIM. In return Ansar al-Shariah in Libya has provided AQIM affiliates with fighters in Mali and training for al-Moulathamoun fighters in 2013.<sup>19</sup> Members of Ansar al-Shariah, including Ahmed Abu Khattala in Benghazi and Sufian Bin Qumu in Derna, also have been implicated in the attack on the U.S. special mission in Benghazi.

After the death of the group's leader Mohamed el-Zahawi, in late 2014, Ansar al-Shariah began losing members to the new ISIS state in Libya. These defections were especially widespread within the Derna branch. Many senior leaders were also killed in fighting in Benghazi against Hifter from 2014-2017. Consequently, in late May 2017, Ansar al-Shariah's most active branch in Benghazi announced its dissolution.<sup>20</sup> But these defections do not mean that the Salafi-jihadi fighters have been defeated. In fact, many of those fighters who defected to ISIS when Ansar al-Shariah was under pressure in the east are now returning to al-Qaeda affiliation.<sup>21</sup>



## BENGHAZI REVOLUTIONARIES SHURA COUNCIL

**Current Status:** Active since June 2014

**Area of Operation:** Benghazi

**Leaders:** Ismail Sallabi, Mohamed el-Dresi, Wissam bin Hamid (deceased), Jalal Makhzoum (deceased)

**Fighter Size:** Around 4,000-5,000 in 2014

**Capabilities:** Assassination campaigns targeting local police and military officers, as well as infrastructure; urban warfare including setting landmine boobytraps, occupying residential complexes, and reliance on snipers, car bombs, and suicide attacks; anti-aircraft equipment; attacks on critical infrastructure, such as airports

Some groups have had independent success, but there has been a tendency to form Salafi-jihadi umbrella organizations with some connections to al-Qaeda. One of the predominant organizations is the B.R.S.C., which has contained once-powerful militias like Ansar al-Shariah-Benghazi, as well as the Omar Mokhtar Brigade, the February 17th Brigade, Libya Shield I Brigade, and the Rafallah al-Sahati Brigade. The B.R.S.C. was created in response to Hifter's Operation Dignity, which was launched in May 2014 to rid Benghazi of these groups. The groups within the B.R.S.C. have varying degrees of affiliation with AQIM, however their primary goal has been to resist Hifter.

The B.R.S.C. has at different times cooperated with ISIS on the shared goal of fighting Hifter, but has strived to distance itself from the Islamic State. The group has been more closely aligned with the Benghazi Defense Brigades (B.D.B.), an umbrella group with connections to Ansar al-Shariah that existed from June 2016-June 2017 to support the B.R.S.C. mission. Elements from the B.D.B. are still active since Hifter's forces removed them from their base in Jufra in mid-2017. The B.R.S.C. reportedly lost a number of important commanders in 2017, including Jalal Makhzoum and Wissam bin Hamid, as Hifter's forces sought complete control of Benghazi. By the summer, the B.R.S.C. controlled very little territory within Benghazi itself and its fighters were attempting to flee the city.



## DERNA MUJAHIDEEN SHURA COUNCIL

**Current Status:** Active since December 2014

**Area of Operation:** Derna and its environs

**Leaders:** Salim Derby (deceased), Abdul-Hakim el-Hasidi

**Fighter Size:** Around 1,000-3,000

**Capabilities:** Provision of public services and city administration, urban warfare, anti-tank and antiaircraft equipment, summary executions, other human rights violations on the local population

In Derna, the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council (D.M.S.C.) is the other predominant Salafi-jihadi umbrella organization, and includes the Abu Salim Martyrs' Brigade (A.S.M.B.). Some members of the A.S.M.B. have sought to participate in democratic processes, putting them at odds with other hardliners, including Ansar al-Shariah's Derna branch, which has worked with the D.M.S.C. in the past. AQIM has supported the B.R.S.C., D.M.S.C., and other, smaller shura councils, including through providing advice on how to resist ISIS expansion.<sup>22</sup> Elements of the D.M.S.C. have controlled Derna—supplanting any central government control from Tripoli—since 2012. Unlike the B.R.S.C., the D.M.S.C. has more consistently been at odds with ISIS, with the latter using Derna as its first Libyan headquarters from late-2014 until the D.M.S.C. expelled it from the city in mid-2015 during a temporary period of cooperation with Hifter.

The D.M.S.C. has opposed Hifter and the L.N.A. since mid-2014, only briefly working together in 2015 to expel ISIS from Derna. But Hifter has attempted to blockade Derna to weaken the D.S.M.C. since shortly after the group re-assumed control of the city from ISIS later in 2015. This blockade intensified in late-2016/early-2017. Under increasing pressure from Hifter's forces, the D.M.S.C.'s mission has expanded from implementing a strict interpretation of shariah law within Derna to resisting L.N.A. advances. The group has also pledged allegiance to the hardline Islamist Grand Mufti Sadiq el-Ghariani, who has expressed broad support for Ansar al-Shariah.



## ISIS IN LIBYA

**Current Status:** Active since November 2014, no meaningful territorial control since December 2016

**Area of Operation:** No current headquarters, but scattered across Libya including in Bani Walid, Sabratha, Benghazi, the Sirte environs to the south, and possibly in the south around Ubari and Sebha

**Leaders:** Jalal el-Dine el-Tunisi, Abu Hadhifa al-Muhajir, Abu Talaha el-Tunisi

**Fighter Size:** Several hundred in 2017 (possibly up to 5,000 at its peak)<sup>23</sup>

**Capabilities:** Urban warfare including sniper attacks, landmine booby traps, car bombs; public administration including policing and taxation; access to foreign fighters; attacks on critical energy infrastructure, high value targets frequented by foreign nationals, like hotels, as well as Libyans and expatriate workers in Libya

Libya's permissive environment allowed ISIS to establish its strongest emirate outside Iraq and Syria in late 2014.<sup>24</sup> Unlike most other Salafi-jihadi movements in Libya, ISIS had territorial aspirations to build an Islamic State within Libya's borders. By January 2015, ISIS was able to attack the Corinthia Hotel, a popular destination for foreigners visiting Tripoli, in one of its first attempts to communicate its power in Libya.<sup>25</sup> Over the next year, ISIS claimed Derna as its headquarters, followed by Sirte after they were expelled by the D.M.S.C. in mid-2015. It also began attacking eastern oil installations from its nearby headquarters in Sirte in an attempt to disrupt revenues to any governing body that could resist them. The intent was never to control Libya's oil.

Militias mostly from nearby Misrata, nominally aligned with the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (G.N.A.), launched an offensive in April 2016 that eventually routed ISIS from Sirte eight months later. U.S. air support through Operation Odyssey Lightning was critical to this success. Since December 2016, ISIS in Libya has been debated as a fall-back position for ISIS forces under pressure in Iraq and Syria, but ISIS no longer holds territory there.<sup>26</sup>



There is collaboration and competition within and among the Salafi-jihadi groups themselves, underscoring the fluid nature of Salafi-jihadi allegiances. ISIS and Ansar al-Shariah members fought side-by-side against Hifter in Benghazi, with the B.R.S.C. only

**Some Salafi-jihadi movements in Libya have... rallied against Hifter, who poses an existential threat.**

recently distancing itself publicly from ISIS.<sup>27</sup>

Ansar al-Shariah Libya branches have also maintained connections to transnational Salafi-jihadi groups like Ansar al-Shariah's Tunisia branch and AQIM.<sup>28</sup>

But ISIS officials regularly cited the complex Salafi-jihadi competition in Libya as one of the main challenges to expansion.<sup>29</sup>

After Ansar al-Shariah leader, Mohammed el-Zahawi, died in Benghazi in late 2014, ISIS benefited from defections of Ansar al-Shariah to its camp.<sup>30</sup> After devastating setbacks for ISIS in Sirte, Benghazi, and Sabratha since 2016, Ansar al-Shariah's remaining branches may already be benefiting from ISIS defectors in turn. The D.M.S.C. was also critical to expelling ISIS from its initial headquarters in Derna in 2015.<sup>31</sup> AQIM has also tried to undermine ISIS as a group encroaching on its area of operations.<sup>32</sup> The formation of the Jama'at Nasr Al-Islam wal Muslimin in March 2017 may also have been a way for al-Qaeda affiliates to compete with ISIS.<sup>33</sup> In addition, there are tensions between the three generations of Salafi-jihadis: the "Afghan Arabs" who fought Qaddafi in the 1990s, those who fought alongside al-Qaeda in Iraq after 2003, and those who fought in Syria after 2011 (which include some individuals from the second generation).<sup>34</sup>

Although all these groups ascribe to strict interpretations of shariah, their operational, strategic and spiritual objectives differ. Ansar al-Shariah and ISIS have attempted to fill the institutional vacuum with their own police and courts. To fulfill their objectives of local or territorial control, these groups undermine central and local government authority, often through assassination campaigns. ISIS has employed particularly brutal techniques to impose its views, while Ansar al-Shariah and components of the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin have emphasized outreach to local communities. Some Salafi-jihadi movements in Libya have also rallied against Hifter, who poses an existential threat. Other groups like AQIM and al-Mourabitoun seek to undermine insufficiently Islamic governments and attack foreigners while maintaining safe havens from which they can launch such attacks in neighboring countries.<sup>35</sup>





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## DRIVERS OF SALAFI-JIHADI MOVEMENTS: PUSH AND PULL FACTORS

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Despite the complex and competitive militia landscape, Salafi-jihadi movements have sustained themselves due to a number of push and pull factors incentivizing membership and support. No one push or pull factor can be the sole driver of Salafi-jihadi movements. For example, socioeconomic drivers alone cannot explain radicalization since most Libyans experience socioeconomic hardships, but eschew violent extremism. There are also very personal reasons why individuals would be driven to join these movements. Taken together, however, the factors below illustrate why these movements have thrived and may help policymakers develop effective tools to combat them.

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### PUSH FACTORS

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Factors that push individuals toward Salafi-jihadi movements in Libya include a history of participation in such groups, the cult of victimhood pervading Libyan society, marginalization of specific groups, and socioeconomic hardships. Libyans made up a significant proportion of the “Afghan Arabs” in the 1980s. In late 2007, the Sinjar records also revealed that disproportionate numbers of al-Qaeda in Iraq fighters were Libyan.<sup>36</sup> In 2016, an ISIS defector leaked around 3,600 foreign fighter records, revealing that Derna and its environs had the single highest per capita rate of foreign fighters joining ISIS of global provinces recorded.<sup>37</sup> Over three generations, jihadi activity has become a profession in some communities.

Salafi-jihadi activity also provides a way for individuals to reclaim their dignity and respect after decades of repression during the Qaddafi regime. This cult of victimhood is likely to continue, especially if Hifter gains more power and employs repressive tactics against moderate political Islamists and other enemies. It will also persist if the

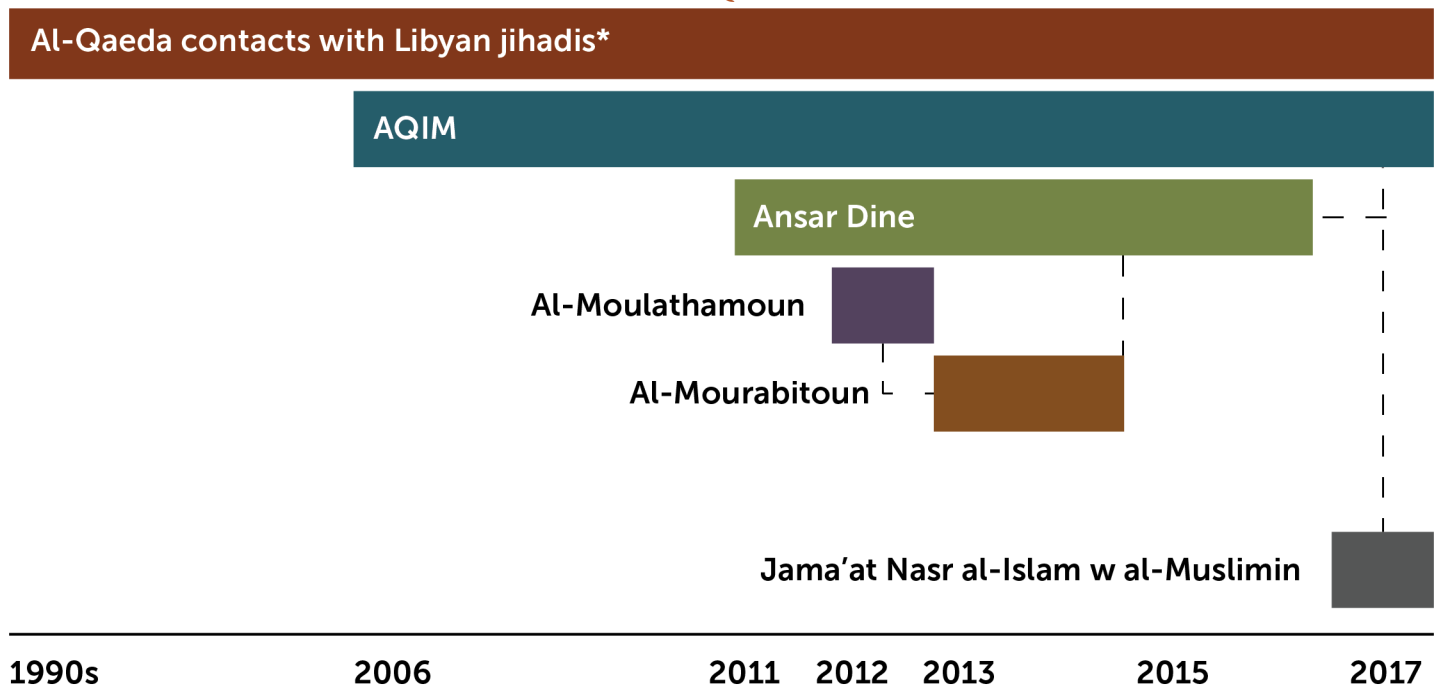
Libyan people feel abandoned by global partners and a persistently corrupt government.<sup>38</sup>

“No one push or pull factor can be the sole driver of Salafi-jihadi movements.”



Some groups are more prone to being subsumed by this cult of victimhood, especially minority communities like the Tuareg and Amazigh, as well as some Islamist groups. All these groups have experienced marginalization during and after the Qaddafi regime. Tuareg and Amazigh communities, for example, felt that their rights were not protected by Qaddafi, by subsequent governments, or through post-2011 draft constitutions. Tribes seen as complicit

FIGURE 1: EVOLUTION OF TRANSNATIONAL AL-QAEDA GROUPS IN LIBYA



\*Al-Qaeda connections with L.I.F.G. existed, but the L.I.F.G. remained a primarily Libya-focused group, not transnational



in Qaddafi-era crimes are also vulnerable to radicalization due to neglect and/or persecution since 2011. Elements within the Warfalla tribe, for example, have complained in the past about disenfranchisement as retribution for their favored status during the Qaddafi regime. ISIS tried to exploit that marginalization and built cells near the Warfalla stronghold of Bani Walid beginning in late 2016.<sup>39</sup>

The decline in standards of living in Libya since 2011 and the lack of economic opportunity may also drive individuals toward Salafi-jihadi movements. Public services including electricity, telecommunications, water, sanitation, and local security are weak, especially in the west and south. Libya's bloated energy sector and state policies inhibit the privatization and economic diversification needed to create attractive jobs for young people. Despite recent



improvements in the oil sector, oil production is volatile in the absence of state control over oil infrastructure. Libya risks complete economic collapse by 2019, preventing any government from paying state salaries or coping with the security vacuum these groups exploit.<sup>40 41</sup>

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## PULL FACTORS

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There are also factors that pull individuals to Salafi-jihadi groups, many of which relate to the security vacuum: access to weapons, money, foreign fighters and the lack of organized resistance to these movements. The presence of key Salafi-jihadi leaders and perceived support for Salafi-jihadi movements among key Libyan spiritual leaders like Grand Mufti Ghariani also attract individuals. Local affinity for Salafi-jihadi ideology is less of a pull factor. Most Libyans adhere to the Maliki madhab, a moderate school of Islamic thought.<sup>42</sup>

Salafi-jihadi movements have had access to loose weapons and foreign fighters due to the massive weapons stockpiles and porous borders that have characterized Libya in the absence of strong governing institutions. After the 2011 revolution, Libya had one of the largest uncontrolled stockpiles of man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) in the world, as well as around 250,000-700,000 less sophisticated conventional weapons and associated equipment.<sup>43</sup> Successive Libyan

governments have been unable to secure these weapons, which have easily made their way into the hands of Salafi-jihadi organizations and weapons traffickers.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Libya's vast desert borders have stymied government efforts, as well as Libya's neighbor's efforts to contain threats from Salafi-jihadi movements.

Salafi-jihadi organizations also have had a wide variety of potential financing mechanisms, including through connections to smuggling networks, kidnap for ransom (K.F.R.) operations, access to state salaries, taxation of local populations, bank robberies, foreign funds from Libyans overseas, or wayward Qatari support.<sup>46 47 48 49</sup> With this funding, groups including ISIS and Ansar al-Shariah have been able to pay fighters monthly salaries of \$100 or more, which is more than many individuals could make working legitimate jobs.<sup>50</sup>

Trafficking in drugs, weapons, other commodities, and people earn non-state actors including Salafi-jihadi organizations millions of dollars per year.<sup>51</sup> Mokhtar Belmokhtar in particular has been able to take advantage of the lucrative cigarette smuggling business

“...groups including ISIS and Ansar al-Shariah have been able to pay fighters monthly salaries of \$100 or more...”



in the region, which is worth around \$1 billion per year. After unifying with MOJWA, al-Mourabitoun also began benefitting financially from the regional cocaine trade.<sup>52</sup> The burgeoning coastal migrant trafficking economy separately contributes up to \$371 million per year to the black economy in which these groups participate.<sup>53</sup> Salafi-jihadi organizations often launder money from these trades through charity front organizations.<sup>54</sup>

K.F.R. operations are on the rise in Libya in 2017, including in Tripoli. Ransom demands for local residents can net groups around \$150,000.<sup>55</sup> By contrast, these groups tend to demand millions of dollars in ransom payments from governments when they kidnap foreign nationals.<sup>56</sup>

**Libya's security and political vacuum is the greatest pull factor driving Salafi-jihadi movements.**

More recently, militias in Libya, likely including Salafi-jihadist groups, have begun kidnapping migrants making their way to the coast and demanding ransom payments from their families. Migrants have claimed these militias have demanded between \$8,000 to \$10,000, and threatened

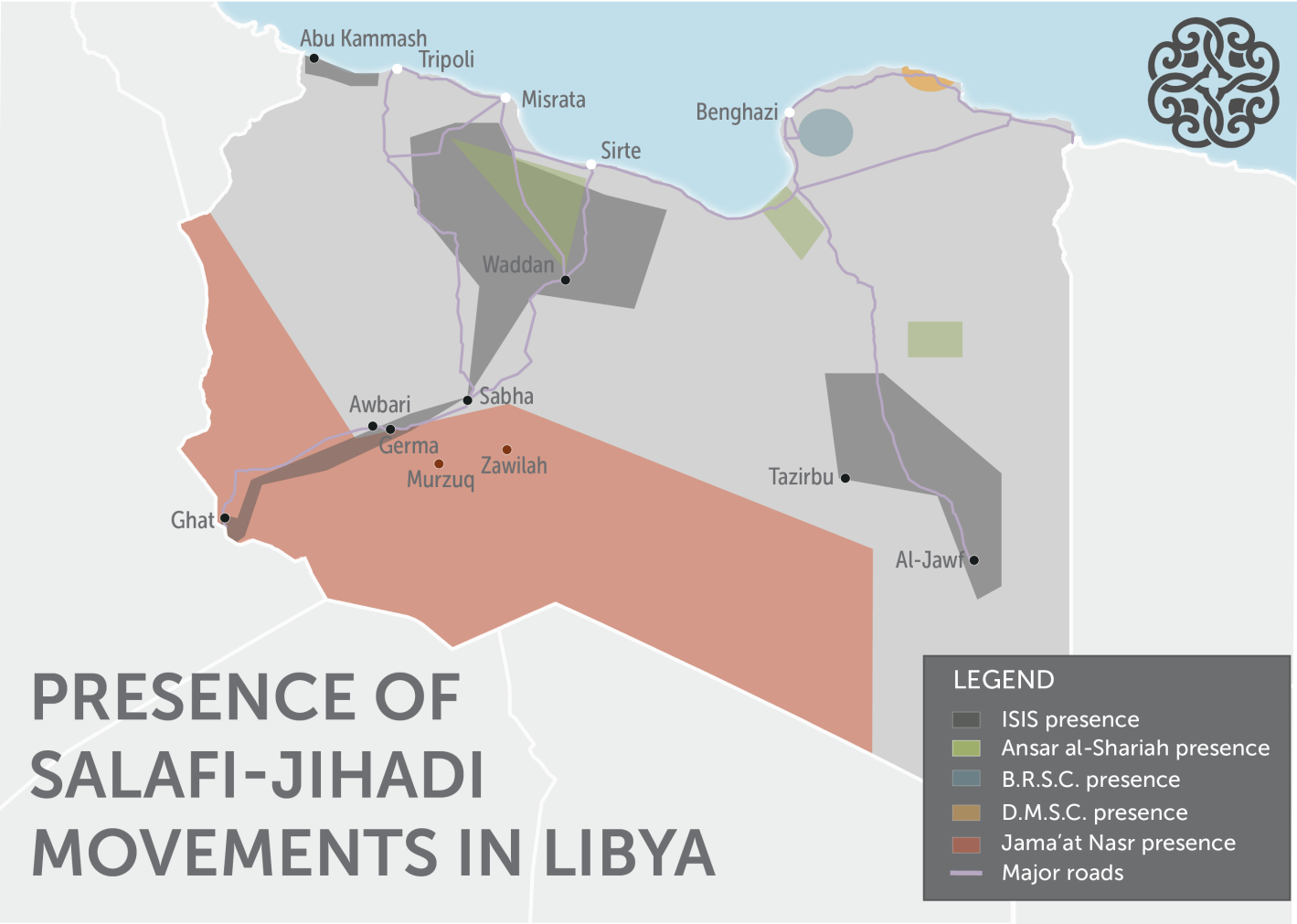
to kill them if they were not paid.<sup>57</sup> ISIS has also taxed criminal gangs involved in the smuggling trade.<sup>58</sup> Interpol and Europol have suggested that there are currently 800,000 migrants in Libya waiting to travel to Europe, making K.F.R. operations targeting migrants a potentially large source of income for militias, including those affiliated with Salafi-jihadist movements.<sup>59</sup>

During its occupation of Sirte, ISIS was able to impose religious taxes (zakat) on the local population, which could cost business owners around \$3,500 per year.<sup>60</sup> Since ISIS lost a territorial foothold in Libya, however, other sources of financing have become more important. There have also been allegations that ISIS loots antiquities from Libya's many world heritage sites to sell in Europe.<sup>61</sup> It has also been suggested that extremist groups in the Sirte area were able to benefit significantly after an October 2013 bank robbery in the city that netted the perpetrators \$54 million in local and foreign currency.<sup>62</sup>

Yet none of these groups has been able to significantly exploit Libya's oil. Many of them remain only modestly financed, but Libyan authorities cannot police any of these funding sources.



FIGURE 2: PRESENCE OF SALAFI-JIHADI MOVEMENTS IN LIBYA



Libya’s security and political vacuum is the greatest pull factor driving Salafi-jihadi movements. Then-U.N. Special Envoy to Libya Martin Kobler quipped at the height of ISIS’ power that the group had the strongest governance model among competing power centers.<sup>63</sup> Other groups like Ansar al-Shariah have sought to provide public services where the central government could not to build local support. Libya remains attractive to foreign fighters as a refuge where they can interact with senior leaders and transit between fronts.<sup>64</sup> ISIS emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi even encouraged fighters to fall back to Libya amid international pressure on Raqqa and Mosul in 2016.<sup>65</sup>



Even when there was only one government in Libya from 2011-2014, it was too weak to counter threats from these groups. Since the political crisis beginning in late 2013 and accelerating into civil unrest in 2014-2015, multiple, parallel governments have been preoccupied fighting among themselves instead of unifying against common threats from Salafi-jihadi movements.

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## THE OUTLOOK FOR SALAFI-JIHADI MOVEMENTS IN LIBYA

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Without widespread support from locals, most Salafi-jihadi movements have not been able to expand rapidly. Yet they have been able to maintain safe havens, even under significant pressure like ISIS was in late 2016 and into 2017. Competing poles of power—Hifter in the east and militias nominally aligned with the G.N.A. and in the west—have fought ISIS

**... infighting allowed  
ISIS and other Salafi-jihadi  
groups to evolve and grow in  
late 2016 and 2017.**

in Benghazi and Sirte, respectively, to gain international support as primary counterterrorism partners. But after pro-G.N.A. forces worked with U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) to successfully dislodge ISIS from its Sirte headquarters, denying it territorial control in Libya,

factions have competed for power instead of uniting to eliminate common enemies.<sup>66</sup>

This infighting has allowed ISIS and other Salafi-jihadi groups to evolve and grow in late 2016 and 2017. ISIS could turn into a group with similar attributes to al-Qaeda affiliates in the area. Unification under the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin in March 2017 will undoubtedly strengthen future coordination among al-Qaeda groups, leading to new attacks through the Maghreb and Sahel.<sup>67</sup> Al-Qaeda affiliates also remain in a strong financial position, especially compared with ISIS today, because of their relationships with Libya's black market economy, institutionalized over decades.

Political opposition to Salafi-jihadi movements is also weak. The defunct government in Tripoli that still attempts to undermine the G.N.A. has defended Ansar al-Shariah, protesting its designation as an international terrorist organization in 2014.<sup>68</sup> Hifter's supporters have accused rivals of providing material support to these groups in Benghazi, particularly by sea





via Misrata.<sup>69</sup> They have also tried to link powerful rivals from Misrata to terrorist activity. Hifter's campaigns in Benghazi and Derna led to the deaths and capture of many al-Qaeda-affiliated leaders, but disunity has prevented total expulsion of these groups after over three years of fighting.

The drivers of Salafi-jihadi movements in Libya are unlikely to change markedly in the next one-to-four years. These movements will, therefore, continue to cooperate and compete with each other in the persistent vacuum.

It will take years for Libyan institutions to have the capacity necessary to support rule of law, control loose weapons, manage borders, counter terrorist financing, and provide public services and security throughout Libya. These efforts can only take place in the absence of the civil unrest that currently plagues Libya. These are key capacities needed to counter some of the push and pull factors mentioned above, underscoring the deep importance of the faltering political dialogue to end the crisis and combat the power of Salafi-jihadi movements.

Hifter's role in Libya's future will also have an impact on the future of Salafi-jihadi activity. It is likely that he will have a leading role in a reunified government when it can be formed. The U.N. mediator and other world leaders have accepted this eventuality, as have some political Islamists including Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups.<sup>70</sup>

Hifter, however, is an enabler of future Salafi-jihadi activity as much as he claims to be its chief threat. He has been largely unwilling to participate in political dialogue, believing he can take over the country without compromising. As a result, Hifter would marginalize parts of the population most vulnerable to recruitment by Salafi-jihadi movements. At the same time, Hifter does not have the capacity to cope with the magnitude of the Salafi-jihadi threat alone.

In the near future, some anti-Hifter and nominally pro-G.N.A. forces could be tempted to align with some groups with Salafi-jihadi ties to form a viable counterweight to Hifter's expansion. Hifter and his allies will seize the opportunity to cast them as terrorists as well—particularly in the context of increased hostility toward all Islamists in Libya following the fall-out between Qatar and other Gulf states in June 2017. This portrayal would leave these groups vulnerable to discreditation, marginalization, and physical attack. Already Hifter's

“...Hifter would marginalize parts of the population most vulnerable to recruitment by Salafi-jihadi movements.”



forces have targeted military members of the Misratan military council with connections to the controversial B.D.B.<sup>71</sup> If pro-G.N.A. forces surrender to this temptation, there is a risk that foreign security assistance to the internationally-recognized government could end up in the hands of Salafi-jihadi movements.

Concurrently, it is also unlikely that Libya will experience enough economic growth and development in the next one to four years to overcome the socioeconomic factors that push individuals toward Salafi-jihadi movements. Post-revolution budgets have prioritized large allocations to subsidies and the bloated public sector, which employs around 77 percent of the workforce.<sup>72</sup> Development spending that would help increase economic diversification and educational and employment opportunities for vulnerable communities is negligible. This lack of development could exacerbate the cult of victimhood among vulnerable populations, especially if scarce investments are not distributed throughout Libya.

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## CONSEQUENCES OF SALAFI-JIHADI PERSISTENCE

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Although ISIS and Ansar al-Shariah have faced setbacks since late 2016, they have not significantly diminished the Salafi-jihadi influence in Libya. The chaotic environment will continue to make Libya attractive to these groups, including reconstituted ISIS cells.<sup>73</sup>

In this context, terrorist attacks—including targeting foreigners—will likely continue and possibly intensify in Libya, the region, and Europe. These attacks could fuel instability in vulnerable neighboring countries, including Tunisia, Egypt, Mali, and Niger. Libyan cells

**The chaotic environment will continue to make Libya attractive to these groups, including reconstituted ISIS cells.**

have been implicated in terrorist attacks since 2015 in Paris, Berlin and, more recently, Manchester and London.<sup>74 75</sup> Libya's persistent status as a Salafi-jihadi safe haven would provide these groups with an escape valve and limit the effectiveness of regional counterterrorism policies. Airstrikes and drone strikes will not be able to reliably prevent such attacks as long as Libya's porous

borders, loose weapons, and security vacuum persist.

In Libya itself, hotels popular with foreign diplomats and businessmen are particularly vulnerable, as are oil and gas facilities, government and security institutions, and foreign



missions. The economic impact of such attacks could be staggering, especially attacks that halt oil production and disrupt electricity.

These attacks could intensify as more foreign diplomats attempt to reopen embassies in Tripoli, as the Italians and Turks have already done.<sup>7677</sup> International oil corporations would also have to take this increased threat into account when deciding how to reengage now that oil production has risen since September 2016—reaching 900,000 barrels per day as of late June 2017, according to the Libyan National Oil Corporation.<sup>78 79</sup> As ISIS reconstitutes itself and competes with other Salafi-jihadi movements for recruits and influence, these groups may also resort to high-profile attacks as part of recruitment strategies.

These attacks would not only prolong Libya's global isolation, but they would also undermine much-needed capacity-building in state institutions. These interferences have been a clear motivation behind ISIS' probing attacks on oil installations in Libya since 2015.<sup>80</sup> There is also a chance that more al-Qaeda affiliates could form a temporary alliance to combat any increased ability of the central government to threaten them—building off of the new Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin group. In the continued vacuum, transnational Salafi-jihadi movements under pressure in other countries will be able to retreat to Libya, where they will continue to provide services the government cannot to win over local recruits and supporters.

Weak government institutions have also begun to rely on foreign airstrikes to augment their own counterterrorism capabilities. Four months of U.S. AFRICOM airstrikes against ISIS targets in Sirte were critical to expelling the group from its headquarters by December 2016. Hifter separately relies on support from Egypt and the U.A.E. for its airstrikes targeting these groups, among other opponents.<sup>81 82</sup> But these airstrikes have been unable to prevent ISIS cells from proliferating on the outskirts of Sirte, Tripoli, and Bani Walid as well as in Sabratha and in the restive southwest. Dependence on international counterterrorism support, including through special forces operators in Libya, could also lead to local resentment of international actors and their own, weak government, especially if civilian casualties can be tied to this support.

“...transnational Salafi-jihadi movements under pressure in other countries will be able to retreat to Libya...”



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## RESPONDING TO THE PERSISTENT SALAFI-JIHADI THREAT

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Libya's stability is a generational project. Reversing the drivers of Salafi-jihadi movements requires long-term, diverse, and expensive programs. Support to unofficial factions in the conflict that claim to be fighting these groups in conjunction with airstrike campaigns will not effectively mitigate this threat. At the same time, Libya is not a foreign policy priority for most international powers, and Libya lacks the funds, institutional capacity, and unified will to reverse these drivers itself.

Given these realities, Libya and its international partners must focus on both short- and long-term programs that will directly impact these drivers, suggestions for which are provided below. Some of these programs may already be underway but should be assessed for adequate funding and appropriate long-term focus.

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### ADDRESSING PUSH FACTORS

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To impede the generational cycle of Salafi-jihadi membership as a professional choice, Libya's international partners could work with vetted Libyan and regional intelligence to identify and target recruiters and foreign fighter facilitators. The ISIS documents leaked by an ISIS defector in 2016 often identify facilitators for specific individuals, which could be a starting point for developing recruitment network maps.

International organizations dedicated to religious freedom could work with Libyan lawmakers to draft legislation protecting religious freedom while discouraging extreme rhetoric, especially in mosques in vulnerable communities. Current laws on these issues are very weak and compete with more extreme fatwas from Grand Mufti Ghariani's influential Dar al-Ifta.<sup>83</sup> To the degree possible, educational N.G.O.s could work with Western governments to expand scholarship opportunities for at-risk, young Libyans to go abroad, independent of Libyan government funding.

Addressing the cult of victimhood that drives frustrated Libyans to Salafi-jihadi movements will require Libyan and international dedication to a long-term national reconciliation process to overcome grievances of the Qaddafi era and post-revolution period. Previous attempts have failed, in part because these processes themselves became mired in the political crisis.

Concurrently, interested global actors should help prevent further marginalization of vulnerable communities. For example, timely and comprehensive assistance reconstructing Sirte is critical. As a favored city under el-Qaddafi, Sirte residents had been marginalized in



the post-revolution context, making them vulnerable to ISIS takeover. The U.N. Development Programme administers millions of dollars in the Stabilization Fund for Libya allocated to cities including Sirte for this purpose. Yet, the \$7.6 million allocated to Sirte is not enough to help the city recover from damage both from the anti-ISIS fight and from the 2011 revolution.

<sup>84</sup> Investment in Libya's long-neglected south is also of critical importance in this respect.

Influential international actors should also press Libyan leaders, especially Hifter, to avoid ostracizing whole segments of the population—whether they are political Islamists, former Qaddafi-era bureaucrats, or minority groups. International actors could tie coveted counterterrorism assistance to such conditions.

There are also many tactics Libya and its supporters could employ to address declining standards of living. Job creation and economic diversification will take time, but investments can begin now, including through corporate social responsibility programs of large international oil companies. The private sector has an important role to play, and companies should strengthen existing coordination with international assistance organizations to ensure programs meet both corporate and Libyan interests.<sup>85</sup> Programs could create educational, entrepreneurial, and internship opportunities linked to universities and youth civil society organizations that naturally lend themselves to viable job prospects.

Because financial institutions will not reform themselves overnight—especially if there is deliberate obstruction by participants in the political crisis—the United States and/or United Kingdom should continue to take the lead supporting negotiations between the G.N.A., the central bank, the audit bureau, the National Oil Corporation, and the House of Representatives to ensure all Libyan citizens have access to adequate public services and salaries.

Attacks on critical infrastructure also have a direct effect on Libyans on the state payroll. Countries with significant commercial interests involving critical infrastructure, including the United States, Britain, Italy, Spain, France, Austria, Greece, and Turkey, should consider commissioning feasible technological and operational solutions to some of these threats. These countries should tie this assistance to more long-term efforts to create security institutions loyal to a unity government, not individual militias.

**“Attacks on critical infrastructure also have a direct effect on Libyans on the state payroll.”**



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## ADDRESSING PULL FACTORS

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To curb Salafi-jihadi and other militia access to loose weapons, international governments could resume site surveys of ammunition storage areas as part of broader demobilization, demilitarization and reintegration, and national reconciliation efforts. Sharing survey information with reunified Libyan defense institutions, international security partners could help craft a strategy to support government efforts to control loose weapons.

Tunisian authorities began construction on a 125-mile border barrier with Libya shortly after Salafi-jihadi groups launched the Bardo Museum and Sousse attacks from Libyan soil in 2015.<sup>86</sup> But the barrier has not been effective. ISIS was notably able to launch an attack on the border town of Ben Gardane in Tunisia in March 2016.<sup>87</sup> The Algerian and Chadian governments have also placed more troops along their vast borders with Libya to prevent free-flowing Salafi-jihadi fighters.<sup>88 89</sup>

But manpower alone cannot combat vulnerabilities along thousands of miles of unclear border markings in the harsh desert. For example, AQIM affiliates in Algeria are still able to coordinate with affiliates like Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin in Libya.<sup>90</sup> Because of weak governance and porous borders, ISIS in Libya has even been able to plot operations in Europe.<sup>91</sup>

Improved border management is also critical to addressing Salafi-jihadi access to weapons, funding, and foreign fighters. It would also deter Salafi-jihadi leaders from using Libya as a safe haven. Instead of futilely stationing hundreds of troops along Libya's long, desert borders, the E.U., Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Mali, Niger, Chad, Sudan, and Egypt could establish an intelligence sharing mechanism. Through such a mechanism border management officials globally can share intelligence voluntarily and regularly about Salafi-jihadi movements, foreign fighter movements, and other smuggling activities. One focus of this new mechanism would be on flows through transit hubs like Sebha, rather than through the borders themselves.

From its Tunis headquarters, the E.U. Border Assistance Mission to Libya could narrow its broad mandate to devote its limited resources to leading these efforts.<sup>92</sup> The curators of this new mechanism could also encourage anti-ISIS coalition entities monitoring foreign fighter flows, Med, vetted elements of the Libyan Coast Guard, and even security services from oil companies to share diverse signals, human, and open source intelligence. This arrangement would give neighboring states and regional actors a better understanding of the nature, location, and usage of smuggling networks. This mechanism could even reveal planned K.F.R. operations.

To counter funding for Salafi-jihadi movements, Western countries should also diversify their financial intelligence assistance, moving from a historical focus on asset recovery to





countering terrorist financing.<sup>93</sup> They should also more aggressively pursue Libyan financiers of Salafi-jihadi movements in their own territories—expanding E.U. sanctions to include actors like Grand Mufti Ghariani. Libya could revive efforts to establish a Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) and draft money laundering and terrorist financing legislation to cooperate with regional and global partners through the Egmont Group.<sup>94</sup> International donors could link assistance related to public financial management to such efforts, which could be monitored by the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force (MENAFATF). MENAFATF has been planning a site visit to Libya in 2017.<sup>95</sup>

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## FUTURE SCENARIOS

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Libya can make little progress addressing the drivers of Salafi-jihadi movements until the political and security vacuum ends.<sup>96</sup> Ultimately, many of the suggestions above depend on political reunification and the emergence of empowered official interlocutors. Finally, addressing the challenge of destabilizing militias is critical to this effort; however these militias will not surrender their weapons or join weak security institutions voluntarily. It will take years to develop institutions capable of compelling this behavior. In the meantime, the best option to combat the political vacuum and begin to address the security vacuum is to support a reunified government capable of working with international partners ready to help Libya strengthen security institutions.

There are two realistic scenarios where one government emerges in the next one to four years: a government resulting from a political dialogue process or a government controlled by Hifter. The first scenario requires significantly more international commitment than the second. Such commitment may not be forthcoming for Libya as a second-tier foreign policy priority among world powers like the United States.

Powerful factions in the conflict, especially those aligned with Hifter, have discredited the U.N.-facilitated political dialogue process. After one year in Tripoli, the G.N.A. and the Presidency Council have not been able to address worsening standards of living in areas under their authority. The House of Representatives has deliberately delayed recognizing the G.N.A., as pro-Hifter House leaders seek revisions to the political agreement signed in 2015 to empower the field marshal. External interference from Egypt, Russia, and the U.A.E.

“The future of the G.N.A. as a unity government is in doubt.”



further undermines the G.N.A.'s authority.

The G.N.A. could prevail if political dialogue efforts succeed in finding revisions to the political agreement acceptable to the House and if Hifter's international patrons convince him that he lacks the capacity to take over all of Libya. The political agreement would require provisions to prevent manipulation by Hifter or other factional leaders. In this scenario, international partners could rely on relatively weak but clear interlocutors with whom they could cooperate on short- and long-term measures countering Salafi-jihadi movements. Hifter's acceptance of the G.N.A. would also make it easier for assistance to reach all of Libya, including potentially marginalized communities under his control. A unified government would create space to complete important, delayed processes like the constitution drafting and national reconciliation. In this scenario, the Salafi-jihadi threat would likely diminish in the long run.

Alternatively, if Hifter eventually deposes the G.N.A. or prevails in presidential elections—currently planned for March 2018, international partners would find a military ruler with a keen interest in fighting a continuous battle against a broadly defined group of “terrorists.” As in the previous scenario, there would be clear interlocutors for international donors.

**A third possible scenario which becomes more likely with international neglect is continued chaos and possible formal division.**

But Hifter not only lacks the capabilities to enforce rule of law and fight terrorism throughout Libya, he would use severe counterterrorism methods and political tactics that would marginalize vulnerable communities, while assisting Salafi-jihadi movements. Despite the illusion that Hifter controls an army, he enjoys

weak alliances with many of his supporters and exercises little control over many of their actions. Powerful militias refusing to reconcile with Hifter, including from Misrata, would retreat to the margins, potentially cooperating with Salafi-jihadi groups to undermine his weak authority. International actors may still be able to implement some effective measures to counter some of the drivers of Salafi-jihadi movements, especially through institutionalizing counterterrorism cooperation among Libya's neighbors. But in this scenario, international partners would find a suboptimal partner in combating Salafi-jihadi activity in Libya, which is likely to become a greater challenge in the long run.

A third possible scenario which becomes more likely with international neglect is continued chaos and possible formal division of Libya. Parallel governing institutions already exist in the east and west. Factions supporting parallel institutions fight sporadically for control of the



south. It is possible that no reunification could occur—either under the G.N.A. or Hifter—leading to continued uncertainty about interlocutors and delayed international assistance. If the country splits, it would also leave international partners with multiple sets of unstable interlocutors. This scenario is ideal for Salafi-jihadi movements, both in the short and long run, as they maintain the conditions in which drivers of Salafi-jihadi movements flourish.

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## CONCLUSIONS

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Many different local and transnational Salafi-jihadi movements have taken advantage of Libya's governed spaces to establish safe havens, impose their ideologies on local populations, and even attempt to re-establish a caliphate. Libyans tend to be religiously conservative, but they have not broadly supported these movements. Yet Salafi-jihadi groups have been able to attract some recruits and maintain operations to meet their objectives in Libya because of six main drivers: 1) membership as a traditional profession in certain communities; 2) the cult of victimhood; 3) declining standards of living; 4) easy access to weapons, money, and foreign fighters; 5) the presence of Salafi-jihadi leaders and support from local spiritual leaders; and above all; 6) the persistent security and political vacuum.

Because of the ongoing political and security vacuum, it is unlikely that these drivers will be eliminated in the next one to four years, exposing Libya, its neighbors, and other U.S. allies in Europe to terrorist attacks and other destabilizing activities. There are a number of ways Libya's international partners, including the United States, could combat these drivers. Honed assistance could include: 1) advanced targeting of Salafi-jihadi recruitment networks; 2) smart investments in expanding educational and economic opportunities for vulnerable youth; 3) increasing focus on national reconciliation; 4) providing assistance to protect critical infrastructure; and 5) developing and sharing intelligence on weapons caches, illicit financial transactions, and transborder smuggling networks.

Few of these responses will be effective in the persistent political and security vacuum. It will take years for Libya to develop institutions strong enough to work with international partners to address these drivers adequately. Ending the political crisis is a critical initial step for countering Salafi-jihadi movements. The two apparent options for reunifying the country—consolidating international and domestic support for the flagging G.N.A. or lending support to Field Marshal Hifter—have very different long-term implications for Salafi-jihadi movements. Although both scenarios create clear interlocutors for international donors, Hifter's intentions and leadership style would empower Salafi-jihadi movements in the long run.



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*Assertions and opinions in this publication are solely those of the author and do not reflect the views of The Middle East Institute, which expressly does not take positions on Middle East policy.*



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