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As the Islamic State sought to expand geographically in the months following the declaration of the caliphate in June 2014, Libya initially appeared to be the organization's most promising frontier outside of Syria and Iraq. Libya's civil conflict—which has pitted the Libya Dawn military coalition, allied with the Tripoli-based General National Congress (one of Libya's two competing legislative bodies), against units aligned with the Libyan National Army, commanded by polarizing former Qaddafi military officer Khalifa Haftar and affiliated with the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (Libya's internationally recognized parliamentary body)—had divided Libya geographically and sent the country spiraling into a state of chaos. The Islamic State quickly seized upon these anarchic conditions, establishing a presence in the eastern city of Derna in the fall of 2014, and then expanding into the central city of Sirte in February 2015. These bases in Derna and Sirte were critical to the group's organizational success, as they provided the organization with a springboard from which to expand into other parts of North Africa. Some supporters also saw the Islamic State's foothold on the southern shores of the Mediterranean as possible rear bases from which to launch attacks into Europe. [1]

But recent developments in Derna and Sirte have revealed the challenges that the Islamic State faces in trying to consolidate and expand its presence in Libya. In particular, the organization has struggled to harness and capitalize upon political grievances in Libya, a Sunni-majority country where religious sectarianism, an issue that the Islamic State has manipulated to great effect in Iraq, has only minimal resonance. At the same time, the group's heavy-handed governing style, its indiscriminate use of violence against Muslim civilians and its liberal application of *takfiri* doctrine (i.e., declaring a Muslim an apostate, an offense punishable by death) have alienated many Libyans and sparked resistance from Libya's tribes, who are perhaps the strongest social organizations remaining in Libya. The entrenched presence of al-Qaeda-linked militant groups in Libya has also constrained the Islamic State's expansion in the country, forcing the latter organization to fight its way to power against far more established, and in some cases popular, militias. Though the Islamic State will remain a potent player in Libya's fragmented security environment so long as the broader civil conflict in the country persists, significant obstacles now lie in its path to expansion in Libya.

The Derna Uprising

The first major challenge that the Islamic State encountered in Libya came in June 2015 in Derna, a city with a reputation for Salafist-Jihadist militancy dating to the 1980s. Ever since Libyans fighting with the Islamic State in Syria returned to Derna and formed the Islamic Youth Shura Council (IYSC) in spring 2014, the relationship between these militants and other militias in the city, several of whom have links to al-Qaeda, has been tenuous. When the IYSC publicly pledged allegiance to Islamic State amir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2014 and redubbed itself Wilayat Barqa (Barqa refers to the eastern coastal region of Libya, or Cyrenaica), the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade (ASMB)—a hardline militant group with ties to al-Qaeda that was commanded by Salim Derbi, a former member of the al-Qaeda-linked Libyan Islamic Fighting Group—announced its disapproval, stating that it would never pledge allegiance to a group based outside of Libya. [2] In the following months, Wilayat Barqa engaged in tit-for-tat fighting with ASMB and other militias, and in December 2014, ASMB and several other militias established the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council (DMSC), a military coalition intended both as a counterweight to Haftar's Libyan National Army and as a bulwark against further Islamic State expansion in Derna ([al-Akhbar](#), December 13, 2014).

While tensions between Wilayat Barqa and other militias intensified in Derna, the Islamic State's iron-fisted approach and excessive use of violence also alienated local populations in the city. In April 2015, the group launched a vicious assault on the al-Harir family, which belongs to the influential Obeidat tribe based in northeastern Libya. Members of the al-Harir family fought back and killed several militants before the family compound was overrun, the first concrete signs of local opposition against the Islamic State's local branch ([Der Spiegel](#), September 4). According to a statement by the DMSC, Wilayat Barqa militants killed six members of the al-Harir family, including two unarmed women who were killed after the fighters originally promised that the women could go to the hospital to receive treatment. [3] Other acts of Islamic State brutality also angered Derna residents. According to one news account, the organization beheaded and then dismembered a man in April 2015, after the man's father failed to pay 300,000 Libyan dinars (over \$200,000 at the current exchange rate) in protection money ([al-Sharq al-Awsat](#), July 13). This attack, and other similar atrocities, prompted many Derna residents, including prominent tribal figures, to flee the city.

Local disillusionment with the local branch of the Islamic State extended to the group's approach to governing the city. For instance, according to a DMSC statement, Wilayat Barqa looted a bank in Derna, and also began taxing local merchants against their will. [4] Derna residents also particularly resented foreign fighters from Tunisia, Egypt and other North African countries, who had flocked to Derna to join the Islamic State there, imposing foreign customs upon the local population ([Der Spiegel](#), September 4).

Tensions between Wilayat Barqa and other factions in Derna came to a head in June 2015, when Islamic State gunmen assassinated Nasir Atiyah al-Akar, a key leader within the DMSC. Al-Akar's death sparked clashes between the two groups, which resulted in the death of Salim Derbi, DMSC's top commander, and prompted DMSC to declare jihad against the Islamic State ([Twitter](#), June 9). Derna residents immediately demonstrated their support for the uprising against the Islamic State, revealing the extent of local hostility toward the group. Just days after al-Akar's death, demonstrators took to the streets of Derna after Friday prayers to demand Wilayat Barqa's expulsion from the city; seven protesters were killed and approximately 30 were wounded when Islamic State fighters opened fire on the marchers ([Reuters](#), June 12). As the uprising against the Islamic State branch gained momentum, local residents replaced Islamic State flags with the Libyan national flag and torched the building that the organization had used as its Shari'a court ([Twitter](#), June 18).

With local backing, the DMSC drove the Islamic State out of Derna within a week, and the organization’s remaining fighters withdrew to al-Fata’ih, a suburb in the hills south of Derna. In recent weeks, the Islamic State has tried to fight its way back into Derna, though it has been rebuffed and consequently remains largely confined to the city’s suburbs.

The uprising against Wilayat Barqa in Derna exposed the vulnerabilities of the Islamic State’s governing strategy in the city. Though the organization’s religious ideology is not necessarily at odds with the sentiments of the local population—several of the militant factions that now govern Derna also adhere to a Salafist-Jihadist worldview—the Islamic State’s brutality, disregard for local customs and inability to collaborate, or at the very least cohabit, with other militant groups created the conditions for a local rebellion. The local branch’s failure to either dominate or co-opt entrenched militant factions in Derna, strategies that have worked well for the Islamic State organization in Syria and Iraq, left the group vulnerable to a coordinated DMSC military offensive. Meanwhile, Wilayat Barqa’s alienation of the local population in Derna virtually ensured that any group that stood up to the group would receive public support.

Instability in Sirte

With Derna out of the Islamic State’s hands, the militant group’s center of gravity in Libya has shifted to the central city of Sirte, Mu’ammar Qaddafi’s hometown. The branch in Sirte is known as Wilayat Tarabulus, which refers to the historic region of Tripolitania in northwestern Libya, and this group has had success in establishing a foothold in Sirte is attributable in large part to the group’s ability to exploit political conditions in the city. Since the fall of the Qaddafi regime, Sirte, like Derna, has been a stronghold of hardline Islamist groups, most notably Ansar al-Shari’a of Sirte, a Salafist-Jihadist militant group affiliated with, but organizationally distinct from, groups in Benghazi and Derna that share the Ansar al-Shari’a moniker. The Islamic State organization has ties with militant groups in Sirte dating back to June 2013, when Turki al-Binali, now one of the group’s top religious scholars, delivered a series of lectures in Sirte and also recruited fighters in the city to join the Islamic State in Syria. [5] When the group began to overtly expand its presence in Libya in the fall of 2014, it was able to tap into the longstanding relationships that al-Binali and others had established. One report claims that members of Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte began defecting to the local branch of the Islamic State as early as October 2014, and in January 2015, Ansar al-Shari’a in Sirte split into two factions, with the dominant group allying with the Islamic State (*New York Times*, March 10). [6] The defection of most of Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte eliminated a potential source of resistance and cleared the path for the Islamic State to move into Sirte in February 2015.

Though there is no evidence indicating that Wilayat Tarabulus encountered significant opposition from Sirte residents when it first moved into the city, the group’s draconian governance tactics in Sirte eventually sparked blowback from local residents. As Aaron Zelin of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy has noted, the Islamic State is now in a “state-building stage” in Sirte; the group has begun providing services and conducting public works projects in the city, in addition to its *dawa* (preaching) activities. [7] However, there is also a darker and more violent side to the organization’s operations in Sirte; the local branch of the Islamic State has begun implementing punishments, including amputations and executions, against those who violate Shari’a law, looting the homes of local politicians and demanding that Sirte residents who previously served in the military or police seek repentance from the group. [8]

It was this latter demand that ultimately ignited tensions between the local population and Wilayat Tarabulus. During Friday sermons on August 7, Khalid bin Rajab Ferjani, a Salafist preacher from the Ferjani tribe and the imam at the Cordoba mosque in Sirte, spoke out against the Islamic State, claiming that the group did not represent Islam and that repenting before the group was forbidden (*Middle East Eye*, August 14). It appears that Ferjani’s speech was intended to coincide with a larger uprising against the organization in the city; on August 4, a Facebook page allegedly representing Neighborhood 2 in Sirte issued a communique calling for an uprising against the Islamic State on August 7. [9] On August 11, Ferjani was assassinated by Wilayat Tarabulus fighters, triggering the anticipated uprising. Members of the Ferjani tribe, Salafists and former members of the security forces in Sirte all mobilized in Neighborhood 3, one of the few remaining areas in Sirte not fully under the Islamic State’s control, and began driving back the group’s forces.

However, the local uprising was short-lived. Islamic State fighters in Sirte called in reinforcements from Nawfaliyah, a town approximately 150 kilometers east of Sirte that is also under Wilayat Tarabulus control, and members of the resistance soon found themselves outmatched and outgunned by the heavily armed Islamic State contingent (*Twitter*, August 12). In short order, Islamic State fighters quelled the uprising and then retaliated massively against those suspected of participating or assisting in the rebellion. According to news reports, the organization killed dozens to hundreds of Sirte residents, including several people receiving treatment at a hospital, and publicly crucified several citizens, including two Salafist clerics, acts intended to deter Sirte residents from rebelling in the future (*Twitter*, August 14). In the weeks since the uprising was crushed, the Islamic State has consolidated its control over Sirte, establishing new checkpoints and imposing new restrictions on both the educational and legal systems in the city.

The Islamic State’s Prospects in Libya

The uprisings in Sirte and Derna illustrate the Islamic State’s greatest strengths and its greatest weaknesses in Libya. It is apparent that the local branch’s heavy-handed tactics and indiscriminate use of force have alienated many Libyans and created fertile conditions for local revolts to take place. However, whereas Wilayat Barqa confronted a superior military force in the DMSC in Derna, the failure of either the Tobruk- or Tripoli-based governments to come to the aid of emboldened but poorly armed local residents in Sirte allowed Islamic State militants to quickly crush the uprising in that city.

Indeed, this incident in Sirte is a microcosm of the Islamic State’s trajectory in Libya thus far. While the Tobruk and Tripoli governments have focused the vast majority of their military resources on each other, the Islamic State has gained ground and influence, using the civil conflict as a strategic opportunity. So long as the civil conflict persists in Libya and neither Tobruk nor Tripoli focuses greater attention and resources on this jihadist threat, the Islamic State, through Wilayat Tarabulus and Wilayat Barqa, will continue to wreak havoc in Sirte and other areas where it maintains influence. However, if the uprisings in Sirte and Derna are any indication, the Islamic State’s ability to expand further in Libya will be constrained by the group’s religious dogmatism and brutality, and by its inability to garner widespread public support from the Libyan population.

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Notes

- 1. Charlie Winter, “Libya: The Strategic Gateway for the Islamic State,” The Quilliam Foundation, February 2015,

<http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/libya-the-strategic-gateway-for-the-is.pdf>.

2. Aaron Zelin, "The Islamic State's First Colony in Libya," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 10, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-first-colony-in-libya>.
3. "The State Organization -- Why We Fought Them, and Why We Forced Them Out of the City," Derna Mujahideen Shura Council Facebook page, June 19, 2015.
4. *Ibid.*; "O Evildoer, Desist -- A Response to the State Organization's Official Spokesman," Derna Mujahideen Shura Council Facebook page, June 25, 2015.
5. For video clips of Binali's lectures in Sirte in June 2013, see <https://justpaste.it/huch>. See also, Kevin Casey and Stacey Pollard, "The Islamic State's Strategy in Libya," Sada, March 25, 2015, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/index.cfm?fa=show&article=59488&solr_hilite.
6. Aaron Zelin, "The Islamic State's Burgeoning Capital in Sirte, Libya," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 6, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-burgeoning-capital-in-sirte-libya>.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. "Uprising in Surt: Al-Nahrawan Friday, 7 August 2015, To Cleanse Our City of the Renegades and Kharijites, Enemies of God -- Surt Is One Tribe," Neighborhood 2-Surt Facebook page, August 4, 2015.