



THE ISIS CHALLENGE IN LIBYA



SIMULATION BACKGROUND

With two rival governments and an expanding ISIS presence in between, Libya has more than its fair share of problems. Reactionary Arab regimes like Egypt worry about an Islamist-leaning administration in Tripoli. Southern European countries must still cope with a refugee flow across the Mediterranean. And almost all parties are concerned about the self-declared Islamic State gaining a foothold in North Africa.

During February and March 2016, Wikistrat ran a two-week crowdsourced exercise to explore the ways in which ISIS was positioning itself in Libya and the implications for the rebuilding of the Libyan state.

More than 30 analysts participated in the simulation, including PhDs, former military personnel and experts from our Africa, Middle East and counterterrorism desks.



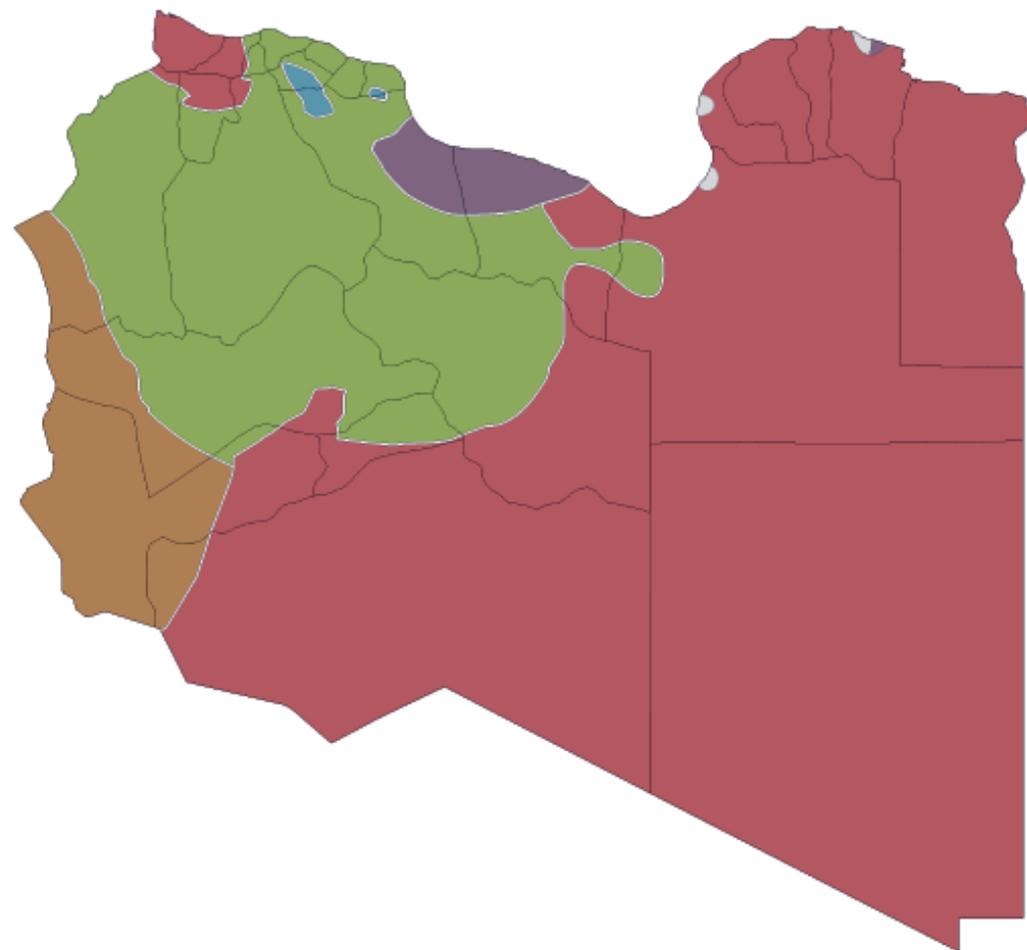
ISIS emblem

ON THE GROUND

DIVISION OF TERRITORIAL CONTROL IN LIBYA

(as of February 2016)

-  Under the control of the Tobruk-led government and Libyan National Army
-  Under the control of the New General National Congress and allies
-  Under the control of ISIS
-  Under the control of the Mujahedeen Councils of Derna, Benghazi and Ajdabiya
-  Under the control of local forces in Misrata district
-  Under the control of Tuareg forces



EXPANSION

Libya is now a strong geographical hub for ISIS. Its expansion there is facilitated by three key factors:

- » The **lack of central government** (in part the legacy of Gaddafi's "radical democracy" project that led to the dismantling of basic political institutions, massive corruption and convoluted power structures) has created a situation in which political consolidation is especially difficult.
- » **Battlefield losses in Iraq and Syria** have incentivized ISIS to look for ways to operate in more advantageous environments that allow the group's cycle of criminal activities and territorial conquests to continue. After ISIS conquers an area and loots it, the group must expand elsewhere in order to ensure a continued flow of income. Expanding the borders of ISIS is therefore not only ideologically motivated – it is an operational necessity.
- » **Western attempts to stabilize Libya are increasingly seen as foreign interventions**, as ISIS has adopted a nationalist narrative and worked to position itself as the only force strong enough to resist.

RELATIONS

The allegiance of Libya's various religious extremist groups is extremely fluid, with organizations coming together into a constantly changing kaleidoscope of broad coalitions.

- » Al-Qaeda has a strong position in the country and can be expected to resist any further expansion by ISIS.
- » Ansar Al-Sharia in Libya (ASL), the group responsible for the 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, has also clashed and cooperated with ISIS.
- » The Islamic Youth Shura Council (IYSC) of Derna pledged allegiance to ISIS in October 2014.

“Just as ISIS in Syria and Iraq first concentrated its efforts on taking territory and disposing of local enemies, ISIS in Libya is currently doing the same.”
– Al-Maamoun Keita, Wikistrat Senior Analyst



Map of the Caliphate as proposed by ISIS

OBSTACLES

However, ISIS in Libya may find its expansion hindered by three structural factors.

- » What differentiates ISIS from other insurgent groups is its **command structure** comprised of professional ex-Ba'athists and its state-of-the-art armory from captured weapons in Iraq and Syria. However, the ISIS affiliates springing up in the Middle East and North Africa have **no organizational and operational links with ISIS in Syria and Iraq.**
- » ISIS in Libya currently **lacks the capacity to provide administrative and social services.** In Libya, oil continues to be controlled by the state-run National Oil Company. Even if ISIS were able to seize major oil fields, it would face a different and more difficult export environment than in Iraq and Syria. ISIS in Libya therefore lacks the capacity to provide the salaries and social services that underpin the group's power in the heart of the Middle East.
- » ISIS will **be unable to leverage broad-based sectarian grievances** that have fueled Sunni support for the group in Syria and Iraq. As a point of contrast, Libya has a homogenously Sunni population and does not suffer from sectarian conflicts between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims.

IMPLICATIONS

- » Libya is now a key geographical hub for ISIS. From here, ISIS can prevent the consolidation of the Libyan state as well as destabilize North Africa and even parts of the Sahel.
- » For militias rivaling the government, the presence of ISIS provides an opportunity to raise their profile among foreign states willing to arm them or promote their claims to power, contributing to further instability.
- » Terrorist organizations can push smuggling routes from Libya to southern Europe and beyond, threaten shipping routes in the Mediterranean and thus invite more international intervention.
- » Libya may become a training center capable of buttressing the network of terror operating in Europe.
- » While it is unlikely that ISIS is exporting large numbers of fighters to Europe from Libya, the perception of this threat and specter of additional attacks increases pressure on European states to take immediate action against ISIS rather than work for long-term political stability in Libya.



FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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