

# The Washington Post

*Democracy Dies in Darkness*



## Libya's civil war creates opening for ISIS return as counterterrorism effort falters

By **Sudarsan Raghavan**

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SIRTE, Libya — Eight suspected Islamic State members were captured in this scarred city in recent weeks, Libyan commanders say. Militant sleeper cells, they say, lurk in some neighborhoods.

Other militants have set up desert camps to the south, where the Islamic State reportedly hides fighters and weaponry, as Libyan militias that once worked closely with U.S. counterterrorism forces on the ground no longer patrol the area.

These are signs of how the expanding civil war in Libya has created a potential opening for the Islamic State to revive itself in the country, according to Libyan commanders and Western officials.

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Today, the militias that targeted the Islamic State are themselves targets of airstrikes by the forces of eastern warlord Khalifa Hifter, who is seeking to oust the United Nations-installed government. The small contingent of U.S. troops that coordinated with the militias left Libya months ago.

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“We used to have eyes in the south,” said Brig Gen. Nas Abdullah, the top military commander in Sirte. “Now we can’t go out there. The planes will bomb us.”

Since Hifter launched his offensive on the capital of Tripoli in April, the militants have staged nine attacks, mostly in the south, said U.S. military officials. These included one that killed nine in the city of Sabha and another that targeted an oil field, killing three. In June, the Islamic State asserted responsibility for two bombings that injured 18 in the eastern city of Derna, the group’s first attack in the city since 2016.

Those attacks triggered four U.S. drone strikes in September, targeting Islamic State positions in the southern desert, including two attacks on the oasis town of Murzuq, about 600 miles south of Tripoli. Social media reports in Libya suggested that one of the strike's targets was Malik Khazmi, a prominent Islamic State recruiter. The airstrikes marked a resumption of attacks on the Islamic State after a 10-month pause.

The strikes killed 43 militants, roughly a third of the Islamic State forces, according to the U.S. military. A senior U.S. defense official, speaking last month to a small group of reporters on the condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence information, described the attacks as a "pretty significant degradation" of the militants' capabilities.

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The U.S. military estimates there are now about 100 Islamic State militants in Libya.

But the official, as well as others interviewed, cautioned that the Islamic State branch remains capable of taking advantage of the current power vacuum.

“There is concern that as this conflict goes on, the ability of ISIS and al-Qaeda to regroup is going to grow,” said a Western official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak freely. “Nobody is under any illusion that we’re out of the woods in Libya yet on the counterterrorism front.”

After the death of Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a U.S. military strike in Syria last month, even more attention has turned to the status of the group’s affiliates around the world.

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At its height, the Islamic State had as many as 5,000 fighters in the country and controlled more than 125 miles of the coastline.

Sirte was an extension of the group's self-proclaimed caliphate. The militants also had bases in Derna and in Sabratha in the west. While most of its fighters were homegrown, the Islamic State also attracted nationals from Tunisia, Egypt, West Africa, Sudan — and even some Americans and Europeans.

Now, three-quarters of the Libyan militias that defeated the Islamic State here are fighting on Tripoli's front lines, taking valuable resources away from the counterterrorism fight.

“Nobody is saying or doing anything,” said Gen. Mohammed Haddad, a senior pro-government commander, referring to the international community. “Are we not on the right side? We fought ISIS in Sirte. Now, Hifter is targeting us.”

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Adding to the Libyans' frustration is a sense they were abandoned by the United States. Top pro-government commanders and officials said that if U.S. counterterrorism ground forces were still in Libya, efforts to battle the Islamic State would be more effective.

"The Americans are not 100 percent supporting us," Haddad added. "I was shocked that when Hifter attacked Tripoli, the Americans here got on board their planes and left. It left a big wound inside me."

Rebecca Farmer, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Africa Command, said that "U.S. forces relocated from Libya due to the deteriorating security situation." She declined to comment on the relationship with their Libyan partners, but said they still coordinate on counterterrorism efforts.

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When asked whether the limited ability to access the south could harm efforts to fight the Islamic State, Farmer said she cannot comment on “internal discussions between U.S. and Libyan leadership.” She added that “we continue to monitor ISIS” and that “we will take appropriate action as ISIS presents itself.”

### **'People are still worried'**

In the past three years, Sirte has slowly resurrected itself.

Entire neighborhoods pummeled by hundreds of U.S. airstrikes during the fight against the Islamic State still lie in ruins. Yet 80 percent of the city's 180,000 people have returned. The university and 67 schools have reopened, local officials said.

Fear, though, lingers. On some store fronts, the stamp of the Islamic State's taxation department remains.

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“People are still worried that Daesh will come back,” explained Tayeb al-Asayfer, a burly fighter assigned to protect the city, using the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State.

After the ouster of longtime ruler Moammar Gaddafi during the 2011 Arab Spring uprising and NATO intervention, militias ruled their own fiefdoms and rival governments emerged. The Islamic State exploited this unsettled situation.

In 2015, the militants seized Sirte, a metropolis speckled with seaside mansions in Libya’s oil crescent, where Gaddafi was born and later killed by rebels in October 2011. As in Syria and Iraq, the militants set up a government and asserted control through public executions, ultraconservative Islamic codes and a cadre of religious police.

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In 2016, months after the U.N.-backed government took office, Libyan militias from Misurata launched an offensive against the militants. Backed by U.S. Special Forces and F-16 fighter jets, the militias drove the Islamic State out of Sirte in December 2016. Thousands of militants were killed.

Many of the surviving extremists melted away into urban populations.

Others fled to Libya's ungoverned and lawless southern steppes in search of safe havens. This extension of the vast Sahara desert is vital for the survival of the Islamic State. The militants have set up desert camps, according to U.S. military officials and Libyan commanders. From there, they have seized trucks carrying fuel and gained other revenue by taxing human traffickers and arms smugglers.

And some crossed the border into Niger on their way to joining emerging Islamic State branches or al-Qaeda affiliates.

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Despite their much smaller numbers, the militants continued to stage hit-and-run attacks and suicide bombings, seeking to gain fresh recruits and sympathizers.

“We will not allow them to use the current conflict in Libya as protection,” Gen. Stephen J. Townsend, the head of the U.S. Africa Command, said in statement after the first U.S. strike.

### **'They are starting to come back'**

In Sirte, the concerns about the Islamic State are growing.

Since April, 10 suspected Islamic State members have been arrested, including the eight in recent weeks, said three Libyan commanders. They included a Libyan female engineer who had walkie-talkies in her house and had transferred money to some residents. Another man was caught after he met with members of alleged Islamic State sleeper cells.

The militants have also erected pop-up checkpoints outside the city to show they are still around.

“They are starting to come back,” said Abdullah, the city’s top commander.

Abdullah’s forces patrol the city day and night. But he worries about the desert, which his men no longer patrol.

After U.S. airstrikes on Islamic State positions, Libyan fighters used to drive to the location to assess damage and gather intelligence. But Hifter has begun to bomb the Libyan forces, including a strike that destroyed their main headquarters. That has kept them from traveling to the sites of more-recent U.S. airstrikes and from patrolling the desert, according to Libyan commanders.

In recent weeks, Libyan commanders and fighters in Sirte have reported militant groups moving in the desert and riverbeds south of the city.

Expanding the war is the best option for Daesh,” said Abdel Aziz Shugmani, 29, who fought the Islamic State here in 2016 and said he saw 15 relatives and friends killed in the battles. “In the desert now, the trade in weapons will grow, and Daesh will benefit from this.”

Muftah Abdusalem, 42, a school janitor, fled Sirte in 2011 because of the anti-Gaddafi revolution and fled again in 2016 when the U.S. airstrikes began. On a recent day, he was rebuilding his destroyed home, a months-long effort determined by what he can save from his meager \$160 monthly income. He knows he may never finish.

“If Daesh comes back, if there’s another war, if I feel any hint of danger, I will leave again,” said the father of four small children.

*Missy Ryan in Washington contributed to this report.*

