

Terrorism Monitor

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p.1

Alexander Sehmer

BRIEFS

p.3

Juha Saarinen

Finland Raises Terror Alert as Jihadist Scene Grows More Complex

p.6

Shahrayar Soroush

Resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan's North

p.8

Nathaniel Barr and David Greenberg

Libya's Political Turmoil Allows Islamic State to Thrive

BELGIUM: THE SCALE OF THE THREAT FACING EUROPE

Alexander Sehmer

Belgian counterterrorism forces are under particular scrutiny following the attacks in Brussels that left at least 31 people dead and hundreds more injured. The attacks on the morning of March 22—which consisted of three blasts, two at Zaventem airport and one at the Maalbeek metro station, just down the road from the EU's headquarters—came four days after the arrest of Salah Abdeslam, wanted in connection with last year's Paris attacks (*Le Soir*, March 18).

Abdeslam, who had been on the run since he allegedly failed to detonate his suicide vest in the French capital in November, had been able to evade capture in Brussels for months, at one point hiding in the same apartment in Schaerbeek for three weeks (*La Dernière Heure*, February 19). After his capture, Belgium interrogators reportedly treated him with kid gloves, interrogating him for just one hour as he was recovering from a gunshot wound in the leg sustained during the operation to apprehend him. Then, in the wake of the attacks, it

emerged that crucial information about Abdeslam's whereabouts had not been entered into the police database (*VTM*, March 25), and that Belgium had ignored a warning from Turkey that it had arrested Brahim el-Bakraoui, one of the Brussels airport bombers, on the border with Syria in June last year (*BBC*, March 24).

Belgian's security forces are undoubtedly struggling – and have admitted a catalogue of errors (*BBC*, March 30) – but to accuse them of being entirely complacent is unfair. They face an uphill task. There are at least 117 Belgian citizens in the country who have returned home from fighting in Syria, according to figures released this year by the interior ministry (*Le Soir*, February 22). Other European countries face the same problem, an issue explored further in this issue of *Terrorism Monitor* in “Finland Raises Terror Alert as Jihadist Scene Grows More Complex” by Juha Saarinen.

For all the fanfare around Abdeslam's arrest, Belgian interior minister Jan Jambon had already warned security forces that jihadist networks were stepping up plans for an attack (*EU Observer*, March, 21). A joint French-Belgian raid on a Brussels apartment on March 15 had uncovered Salafist material, along with weapons and ammunition. It also ended (unexpectedly, it seems) in a

shootout in which another Islamic State (IS) operative in Europe connected to the Paris attacks—an Algerian named Mohamed Belkaid—was killed.

Under pressure in Iraq and Syria, IS has promised further assaults on Europe. Germany, which made at least two arrests in the days following the Brussels attacks, has grown increasingly nervous since the events in Paris (*Deutsche Welle*, March 26). A day after the Brussels attacks, the pro-IS Wafa Media Foundation published a message in which it promised, in typically verbose fashion, to plunge all of Europe into a “black nightmare” and went on to direct comments at UK Prime Minister David Cameron.

The events in Brussels have led to an inevitable wave of arrests across the continent. The issue may lie less in the complacency of the Belgian authorities, and more in the extent of the counterterrorism task facing Europe’s capitals.

ALGERIA: AQIM TARGETS FOREIGN COMPANIES

Alexander Sehmer

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has claimed responsibility for a rocket attack on Algeria’s In Salah gas field. At 6:00am on March 18, three rockets hit the facility in Krechba in the desert region of Ain Saleh, though there were no injuries and the attack caused no damage according to Statoil and BP, the oil companies that run the facility alongside Algeria’s Sonatrach.

The In Salah attack is the first assault on an oil and gas facility in Algeria since In Amenas in 2013, but seems to have been much less ambitious in scale. The In Amenas attack saw gunmen led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar seize the facility – also run by BP and Statoil – and subsequently hold hundreds of workers hostage. At least 40 people lost their lives, including those who were killed when the Algerian army mounted a rescue operation. The event led to a great deal of soul searching, not just on the part of Algeria; in the UK, an inquest strongly criticized BP for not taking adequate security precautions (*The Guardian*, February 26, 2015).

The response this time seems to have been better organized. The Algerian military reacted quickly, surrounding the plant and mounting an operation around the gas field, reportedly killing four militants (*Alalam*, March 21), and wounding another three (*PressTV*, March 20). In the meantime, both BP and Statoil withdrew their employees from the field, leaving the operation of the plant to Sonatrach’s Algerian staff. Sonatrach confirmed its staff were keeping the plant running following a temporary shutdown during the attack, adding that, in fact, production had since increased (*Algeria Press Service*, March 22).

AQIM’s targeting of foreign companies and Algeria’s gas facilities is a strike at an economic nerve, but its statement on the attack that its fighters had used 130mm rockets to target “the Crusader BP, the plunderer of our wealth” (*TSA*, March 18) may also be designed to cultivate local grievances about the exploitation of natural resources. Unconnected with BP’s project, In Salah was the scene of protests against shale gas exploration in 2014, where demonstrators complained the process was contaminating the water supply. By January 2015, there were reports of a 15,000-strong demonstration, with

further protests in Tamanrasset, Ouargla, and even in the capital city of Algiers (*The New Arab*, March 17), leading eventually to the downfall of then minister of energy and mines, Youcef Yousfi (*Le Monde*, May 15, 2015).

Finland Raises Terror Alert as Jihadist Scene Grows More Complex

Juha Saarinen

Finland elevated its terrorism threat assessment for the second time in 18 months in November of 2015. According to the Finnish Security Intelligence Service (FSIS) the terrorist threat against Finland is increasingly complex—and while the threat of “structured attacks by terrorist organizations” remains low by the FSIS assessment—the risk posed by “individual terrorist actions” is rising.

This is only the second time that the FSIS has elevated the country’s security alert. It came ten days ahead of the Paris attacks in which 130 people were killed, and several months before the recent events in Brussels that have left Europe once again on-edge.

The FSIS’s assessment is a result of three key developments:

Changing Social Landscape

Finland’s jihadist scene has been evolving since the outbreak of Syria’s civil war and the rise of the Islamic State (IS). Although there are no public estimates on the number of radicalized Muslims in Finland, the number of individuals of concern to security services due to their conduct (as opposed to their politics) has risen from just a handful in late 2010 to more than 300 as of 2015 (*Savon Sanomat*, February 2, 2015). Finland’s jihadist scene is not monolithic; individuals have been linked to a range of violent Islamist non-state actors, but most recent activity is connected to the jihadist insurgencies in Syria, Iraq, and—albeit to a lesser extent—Somalia.

Aside from the increasing number of “individuals of concern,” Finland’s jihadist scene is developing in other ways. In 2014, the FSIS observed signs of “multi-ethnic radical Islamist networks” forming in Finland (*MTV Uutiset*, March 5, 2014). According to the latest threat assessments, jihadist “support groups” had been established in an attempt to recruit and radicalize individuals. One such support group is an Ansar al-Islam spinoff known as Rawti Shax and Didinwe, which was targeted

in a Europe-wide counterterrorism operation in mid-November 2015. At least three individuals from Finland connected to this group had fought with IS (*Helsingin Sanomat*, November 12, 2015).

Extended Jihadist Networks

By late 2015, at least 70 adult individuals from Finland had travelled to Syria and Iraq, the majority seeking to join jihadist groups, according to an interior ministry report. The current number—including juveniles—is likely somewhere between 80 and 120. [1] Of further concern to the Finnish security services are the approximately 20 militants that have returned home, according to an official estimate that appears to have remained unchanged since at least late 2014 (see *Yle Uutiset*, October 13, 2014; *Ilta-Sanomat*, November 17, 2015). [2]

This increased flow of individuals to-and-from the conflict zones means jihadist groups abroad, particularly IS, increasingly have better knowledge of Finland's domestic Islamist networks. Those who join IS in conflict zones are able to pass on their contacts with extremist individuals and support networks operating within their home country's borders, increasing the interconnectedness of Finland's home-grown jihadists with militant actors abroad.

Fighters returning to Finland with training and stories of supposed battlefield heroism are further able to expand the Finnish radical Islamist scene by recruiting members within their immediate social circles. Indeed, the impact of these social connections—whether through marriage or friendship—is visible in the mobilization patterns of Finnish jihadists and their supporters, particularly those who have traveled from the Helsinki metropolitan region (*The Ulkopolitist*, March 10, 2015).

The lack of information on returnees and their condition—whether they return traumatized and disillusioned or remain dangerous and radicalized—makes it difficult to analyze the extent of the threat, but the potential of returning foreign fighters seeking to engage in terrorist activities in Finland or elsewhere in Europe is not one the security services are willing to exclude.

Influx of Asylum Seekers

The third issue, and one that has had significant impact on much of the European Union, is the unprecedented

number of asylum seekers who have arrived in Europe since 2015, many hailing from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

According to figures from the Interior Ministry, over the last decade, Finland has received somewhere between 1,500 to 6,000 refugees. In 2015, however, Finland received more than 32,000 asylum seekers, stoking fears among Finns that dangerous individuals, particularly those linked to IS, may disguise themselves as refugees to infiltrate the country. In that particular vein, two Iraqis were arrested upon their arrival in Finland in late 2015 following a tip-off from other asylum-seekers (*Hufvudstadsbladet*, December 10, 2015). They are suspected of participating in the June 2014 Camp Speicher massacre, in which IS fighters killed hundreds of Iraqi Shia soldiers.

While a senior interior ministry official recently assured the public that Finnish authorities are well informed about the background of every migrant, this is unlikely the case, as Finland lacks the infrastructure and resources to effectively process the influx (*Verkkouutiset*, March 9, 2016). However, according to the Interior Minister, Petteri Orpo, the authorities have identified few dozen individuals among the refugees arriving in Finland who have "connections to terrorism" (*Savon Sanomat*, March 26, 2016). Finnish authorities face a considerable task in attempting to identify potentially dangerous individuals, as there is very little reliable information available on their activities in various conflict zones, and cooperation with government authorities in Syria, Iraq, or Afghanistan is fraught even at the best of times. Thus far, however, there have been no signs that IS is systematically using the flow to infiltrate Finland with its fighters.

Although the issue should be taken seriously, the short-term security risk from asylum-seekers is likely low. It is a threat that increases enormously, however, if the new arrivals are integrated poorly. With inadequate integration, such individuals can become a promising target for those seeking to radicalize them. Indeed, there has been evidence that young individuals arriving in Finland as refugees are being targeted by jihadist recruiters (*Helsingin Sanomat*, October 3, 2015; *Yle Uutiset*, June 17, 2015).

Furthermore, the arrival of an unprecedented number of asylum-seekers has invigorated far-right groups. In Finland, this has resulted in the establishment of the so-called Soldiers of Odin, an anti-immigrant group formed

in October 2015 that organizes street patrols, which it claims are intended to protect the public. The effect has been a further polarization of society's attitude towards migrants and refugees, with several reported attempted arson attacks on refugee centers.

Increased Threat

The jihadist milieu in Finland has undergone substantial development in the last few years, largely impacted by Syria's civil war, the rise of IS, and the subsequent flow of refugees to Europe. Not only is there an increasing number of individuals from Finland taking part in jihadist activities abroad, but Finnish-based groups have been established to support jihadist violence at home. The FSIS fears that if these emerging domestic groups are left to fester without intervention, they "may resort to operational actions."

The jihadist threat facing Finland—while still relatively low—has markedly increased in recent months and has become more complex and thereby more difficult to predict. It is a trend that is being seen elsewhere in Europe, and at present, there appear to be few successful efforts to tackle it. For Finland, where policymakers seek to take a proactive, precautionary approach, the question is rooted in the prevention of a developing jihadist scene and increasing levels of domestic jihadist activity.

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Notes:

[1] Figures taken from Interior Ministry publication "Väkivaltaisen ekstremismin tilannekatsaus" (November 19, 2015).

[2] A report by the Soufan Group report on foreign fighters, published in December 2015, states the number of returnees to Finland was more than 25, reflecting the author's own findings on new returnees since late 2014. See "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters to Syria and Iraq" (December 2015).

For the full FSIS threat assessment (updated November 3, 2015) referred to in this article, see "Terrorism Threat Assessment 3.11.2015."

Resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan's North

Shahrayar Soroush

Fighting in northern Afghanistan has continued throughout the end of 2015 and start of 2016, culminating in the temporary fall of the strategically important city of Kunduz. The capture of Kunduz, which came much to the shock of the Afghan government and the international community, is an indication of a resurgent Taliban, one whose recent successes are shifting the battlefield to the north of the country.

The Capture of Kunduz

The Taliban's advances in the north have been relatively rapid, with fighters targeting the main electricity transmission lines from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan in the Dand-e-Ghori area of Baghlan province, an area considered to be the heartland for the insurgency's northern operations (*Avapress*, January 27, 2016). At the same time, the Taliban waged a series of offensives aimed at capturing Pole-Khomri, the capital city of Baghlan province, a strategic area that connects Kabul to northeastern Kunduz, Takhar, and Badkhsan provinces, as well as to the cities of Balkh and Faryab (*BBC Persian*, February 8, 2016).

Kunduz fell to the Taliban on September 28, 2015 (*First-post*, October 12, 2015). While it took only days for government forces to recapture the city and deepen the government's control in its districts (Tasnimnews, September 26, 2015), the Taliban's victory was of vital strategic and symbolic importance to the group. Kunduz was the first city to fall at the hands of Mujahideen after the Soviet withdrawal of Afghanistan in 1979 (*Khabar-nama.net*, February 23, 2016). It was from there that the Mujahideen inceptioned their battle for control over the major cities, and eventually the capture of the capital city of Kabul.

Battle for Baghlan

Five months after the fall of Kunduz, Taliban forces started to focus on Baghlan, another strategically-located province in northern Afghanistan. Following their eventual defeat in Kunduz, the Taliban began to build on their capabilities around Pole-Khomri. By February, Tal-

iban fighters had established strongholds in Dand-e-Ghori area, in the west of Pole Khomri, in Dande Shahbuddin, in Kokchenar, and in nine other villages west of Pole-Khomri (*BBC Persian*, February 8, 2016).

As they sought to expand their operations in the center of Balghan province, one of the Taliban's first moves was to blow up the main electricity transmission lines to Kabul, causing the capital to go dark. Government forces subsequently launched their offensives to clear the Taliban strongholds, recapturing these areas a month later (*Iribnews*, March 3, 2016).

While it lacks the symbolic significance, Baghlan is—like Kunduz—of strategic importance for the Taliban. It is linked to the main ports of Sherkhan in Kunduz, which connects Afghanistan to Tajikistan, Hairaton in Balkh province, which connects the country to Uzbekistan, and Aqina in Faryab, which connects to Turkmenistan. Road links from these locations pass through Baghlan and Salang on the way to Kabul, and from there, on to the borders with Pakistan and Iran. The cities' interconnectiveness with other crucial locations poses a threat to the implementation of two key economic projects – TUTAP (the Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan power transmission project), funded by the Asian Development Bank, and the KASA-1000 electricity transmission project intended to supply Pakistan.

Taliban and Islamic State in Faryab and Balkh

Since early 2015, there have been reports of insurgents seizing control of some of the more remote rural districts of the northwestern province of Faryab. The area has been the focus of insurgents since 2007, when newly-emerged Taliban groups were expanding their areas of operation from southern Afghanistan to western and northwestern regions of the country.

Faryab is the powerbase of Afghanistan's current vice president, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, the anti-Taliban warlord who played a key role in Afghanistan's 1990s civil war. In August 2015, Dostum mounted an anti-Taliban operation becoming, with some fanfare, the first of Kabul's new political establishment to appear in military uniform (*Etelatrooz*, October 21, 2015). Since then, he has waged two other operations to clear Faryab from the Taliban, but each with little success.

At the time of Dostum's second operation in Faryab, the security situation had notably worsened, as the Taliban had begun abducting civilians accused of having ties to government. In February 2016, according to local government officials, Taliban fighters abducted passengers from two buses in the Jangal Bagh area of Andkhoi district, but later released them (*Bokhdinews*, February 6, 2016). In another incident, Taliban fighters abducted around 100 civilians traveling from Faryab to Kabul in Khaja Sabzposh district, mortally shooting two but releasing the others (*Shafaqna.com*, February 26, 2016).

Meanwhile, Islamic State (IS) was already known to be present in Faryab—as well as three other major provinces—by March 2015. By May, General John Campbell, the former commander of NATO's Resolute Support mission, was speaking of IS activity in Faryab, Helmand, and Nangarhar (*Shafaqna.com*, July 20).

Under similar threat is Balkh province, governed by the famous Afghan Mujahideen commander, Atta Mohammad Noor. Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Balkh has been one of the most stable provinces in the country. Under Noor—who has twice donned military uniform to lead the security operations to clear Balkh province of violent non-state actors—insurgents had been significantly constrained. In May 2015, Noor announced that almost all of Balkh province was free from the influence of the Taliban and other insurgent groups.

But as the insurgency has found strategic success in the north, the security situation in Balkh has dramatically changed. According to media reports, the black flag of IS has been seen in the province's Zare and Koshanda districts (*Darinews*, March 13, 2016). At the beginning of March, two weeks ahead of the Afghan Nowruz (New Year celebrations), Noor mounted an operation known as Khorshid 21, serving as an acknowledgement of the emergence of IS in his province.

Battlefield in the North

The Taliban are increasingly focused on Afghanistan's north as they seek to expand their geographical control of the country. As they do so, state actors have shown their readiness to defend areas that are their traditional powerbases. However, the presence of IS adds a further troubling dimension to the security situation (*Terrorism Monitor*, March 3, 2016).

Libya's Political Turmoil Allows Islamic State to Thrive

Nathaniel Barr and David Greenberg

Islamic State (IS) has experienced fits and starts in its efforts to expand beyond Syria and Iraq. As IS has tried to gain a foothold in new countries, it has encountered violent opposition from both state and non-state actors. In Algeria, state security forces decapitated IS's nascent *wilayat* (province), which suffered tremendous losses in a series of military operations in May 2015. In several other theaters, including Afghanistan, Somalia, and the Sahel, IS has run up against more powerful jihadist groups, which have aggressively targeted IS supporters. Libya, however, stands out as one of the group's few successes.

The Libyan civil conflict has created a political and security vacuum that IS has exploited, carving out strongholds in weakly governed areas such as Sirte and thereby further fueling instability. Its Syria and Iraq-based leadership (hereafter, IS Central) recognized the potential for growth in Libya early on and poured considerable resources into its Libyan *wilayat*, dispatching high-level officials to Sirte to manage the group's expansion and eventually redirecting hundreds of foreign fighters from Syria to Libya.

In turn, Sirte has become a hub for the group's North African operations. IS Central's interest in Sirte underscores the city's growing strategic value to the organization, and illustrates the group's ambitious plans for its Libyan *wilayat*.

Sending in the Cavalry

In the spring of 2014, several hundred members of the al-Battar Brigade, a Libyan-led military unit based in Syria that pledged allegiance to IS, returned to the eastern Libyan city of Derna. There they established the Islamic Youth Shura Council, a jihadist group that quickly revealed its pro-IS sympathies. Though it is possible the al-Battar members returned of their own volition, it is more likely that IS Central dispatched these militants back to Libya with orders to establish an IS satellite in the country. Subsequently, in September 2014, IS Central sent two foreign officials—a Saudi and a Yemeni—to Derna to receive pledges of allegiance from Libyan IS supporters (*al-Hayat*, November 3, 2014).

At around the same time, IS Central appointed Abu Nabil al-Anbari, a former Baathist who spent time in a U.S. prison in Iraq before rising through the IS ranks, to lead the group's operations in Libya. The appointment of a senior Iraqi to command IS in Libya is an indication that IS Central intends to oversee the group's expansion there, since it has had few qualms appointing locals elsewhere; the IS *wilayats* in Algeria, Afghanistan, and the Sinai Peninsula, for instance, have all been commanded by local militants.

To consolidate its territorial holdings in Sirte, IS Central has doubled down on its support for its Libyan affiliate, sending several high-ranking officials to direct operations in the country. Intelligence officials from the Libyan city of Misrata, which has been the target of multiple IS attacks, assert that IS Central sent a high-profile Iraqi official known only as Abu Omar alongside another Iraqi official from the city of Tikrit to Sirte in October 2015 to manage IS operations in the city. Upon arriving in Sirte, the Iraqi officials established both a *sharia* court and a taxation system in the city, suggesting that IS is looking to fully export its governance model from Iraq and Syria to Libya (*DW*, December 18, 2015).

Two prominent IS commanders followed Abu Omar to Libya; Abu Ali al-Anbari, one of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's top lieutenants, traveled to Libya by boat in early November 2015, according to multiple news outlets (*al-Wasat* Facebook page, November 10, 2015), while Abu Omar al-Shishani, IS's most prominent field commander, was also reportedly in Libya in February 2016 (*Libya Prospect*, February 12, 2016). If true, al-Shishani presumably spent little time there before returning to Syria, where he is thought to have been fatally wounded in a U.S. airstrike. Meanwhile, Turki al-Binali, one of IS's most influential religious clerics, is rumored to have been in Libya in 2015, as well (*al-Wasat*, December 13, 2015).

The fact that IS dispatched al-Anbari, al-Binali, and al-Shishani to Libya reflects IS's commitment to its Libyan affiliate, and bolsters predictions that IS is preparing Libya as a fall-back option in the event the group loses further ground in Syria and Iraq.

Command and Control

With high-level IS officials moving in and out of Libya, Sirte has become a central hub within the IS Africa network.

The relationship between IS *wilayats* outside of Syria and Iraq remains difficult to define, but it appears that the Libyan *wilayat* has developed links with several IS *wilayats* operating in Africa, and may even be directing some of their activities. Sirte's relationship with Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiya—the Nigeria-based militant group commonly known as Boko Haram—provides an instructive example of the Libyan *wilayat's* African connections. According to Jacob Zenn, a Jamestown Foundation analyst who studies jihadist groups in Africa, approximately 80-200 Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiya members have traveled to Sirte to join IS (*CTC Sentinel*, August 21, 2015). Moreover, a well-connected Nigerian blogger alleged that Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiya is now being led by a Libyan militant who had helped to facilitate the Nigerian group's pledge of allegiance to IS in March 2015 (*Fulan's Sitrep*, August 5, 2015). A former Nigerian militant similarly claimed that Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiya now answers to IS commanders in Libya. [1]

IS officials in Sirte may also be directing the activities of Wilayat Sinai, the group formerly known as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis. In February 2016, a security official in North Sinai told an Egyptian newspaper that he had intercepted phone calls between Wilayat Sinai militants that indicated that Wilayat Sinai was receiving instructions from Libya-based officials (*al-Watan*, February 9, 2016). It has not been possible to verify the accuracy of this claim, but it would not be surprising if IS's Libyan *wilayat* had assumed command responsibilities for other IS operations in Africa, considering the direct links between IS Central and Libya.

Influx of Foreign Fighters

As IS has gained strength in Libya, the country has gone from being an exporter of foreign fighters to a destination for them, with IS Central playing a pivotal role in promoting migration [*hijrah*] to Libya and directing foreign fighter flows into the country. Libya had long served as a staging and training ground for foreign fighters heading to Syria, but in December 2014, IS Central reportedly instructed its Libyan *wilayat* to stop sending fighters to Syria and instead to focus on opera-

tions inside the country (*Al-Jazeera*, February 5, 2016). Shortly after, IS propagandists began encouraging foreign fighters from the surrounding region to move to Libya.

In December 2014, IS online supporters published an article highlighting the group's expansion in Libya, and providing basic instructions on traveling to IS strongholds in the country (*Justpaste.it*, December 15, 2014). In March 2015, IS released the eighth issue of *Dabiq*, its English-language online magazine, which featured an article on IS in Libya and noted that the country had "become an ideal land of *hijrah* for those who find difficulty making their way to Shām [Syria] particularly those of our brothers and sisters in Africa" (*Dabiq*, March 31, 2015). Subsequently, in April 2015, the media outlet for Wilayat Tarabulus (the official name for IS in Sirte and central Libya) released a video, entitled "Message to our Brothers in Tunisia," that called upon Tunisians to join IS forces in Libya (*Jihadology*, April 7, 2015). The message indicates the group's primary objective in North Africa, at least at that time, was consolidating support in Libya, rather than expanding into Tunisia.

With IS urging migration to Libya and gaining ground in Sirte, foreign fighters from across the world have flooded into the country. In the summer of 2015, three British women arrived in Sirte and began issuing calls on social media for fellow Britons to join them, explaining that it was easier to travel to Libya than to Syria (Twitter, June 2015). A small number of French foreign fighters have also joined IS in Sirte (*RTL*, March 3 2016). Meanwhile, Libya has become a central hub for foreign fighters from across Africa. Tunisians likely make up the largest contingent of IS foreign fighters in Libya—one estimate put the number of Tunisian foreign fighters in Libya at between 1,000 and 1,500 (*UN Working Group*, July 2015). Fighters from as far afield as Kenya and Senegal have also traveled, or attempted to travel, to Libya to fight with IS. [2] [3]

In January 2016, U.S. intelligence officials assessed that—throughout the latter part of 2015—IS Central had sent several hundred foreign fighters originally destined for Syria to Libya (*New York Times*, January 18, 2016). This revelation was remarkable, especially considering that IS Central's decision to redeploy fighters to Libya came at a time when the group was facing mounting military pressure in Syria and Iraq, and further demon-

strated Libya's strategic importance to IS's caliphate project.

The foreign fighters who have poured into Libya now comprise a significant contingent of IS forces in the country. According to a Misratan intelligence official, approximately 70% of IS fighters in Sirte are foreigners (*CTC Sentinel*, March 17, 2016). Though this estimate is almost certainly too high, it reflects outside perceptions about foreign fighters' disproportionate representation within IS's Libyan operations.

Obstacles to IS in Libya

With foreign fighters streaming into Sirte and IS Central devoting significant resources to the group's operations there, the international community is understandably concerned about IS expansion in Libya. But several obstacles stand in the way of the group's future growth.

Libya lacks the sectarian tensions that IS has exploited to mobilize Sunni populations in Syria and Iraq, and as a consequence, IS must depend on foreign fighters, alongside a hardened core of Libyan militants. This has done little to help it win over the local population, which has rebelled against it in both Sirte and in Derna. In the latter, rival jihadist factions, supported by local residents, forced IS fighters to withdraw entirely in June 2015. [4]

IS is also less powerful than it purports to be in Libya. Even though foreigners have significantly boosted its ranks in the country—recent estimates suggest that there are between 3,000 and 6,500 IS militants in Libya—other armed actors in Libya, including the now-fragmented Libya Dawn coalition and its rival, the Libyan National Army, are far larger and better-equipped.

Further, if a political accord is reached, a unity government would be able to draw upon resources from the international community to fight IS. However, a sustainable political settlement in Libya still appears to be a long way off, and any unity government that is established will struggle to rein in Libya's patchwork of armed factions. Indeed, as long as Libya remains politically fragmented, IS will continue to thrive and expand.

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Notes

1. Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram and the Islamist Insurgency in West Africa," Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Terrorism, Non-Proliferation, and Trade Subcommittee, February 24, 2016, https://gallery.mailchimp.com/28b6673fcc2022a1dd557acae/files/Jacob_Zenn_Written_Testimony_Feb_24_2016.pdf.
2. In March 2016, Kenyan officials arrested four individuals trying to travel through Sudan to Libya. See Cyrus Ombati, "Police Arrest 4 Terror Suspects at Busia Headed for Libya to Join ISIS," *Standard Media*, March 6, 2016, <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000194048/police-arrest-4-terror-suspects-at-busia-headed-for-libya-to-join-isis>.
3. At least a dozen Senegalese fighters are believed to be in Sirte. See "Who Are the Senegalese Men Joining the Islamic State Group?" *France 24*, February 1, 2016, <http://observers.france24.com/en/20160201-senegal-jihadist-islamic-state>.
4. For more on local uprisings against IS in Libya, see Nathaniel Barr, "The Islamic State's Uneven Trajectory in Libya," *Terrorism Monitor* 13:19 (September 17, 2015).