

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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SYRIA: GOVERNMENT FORCES MOVE ON THE SOUTH

Alexander Sehmer

Syrian government forces have begun their assault on parts of Syria's southwest, effectively ending a ceasefire agreement in place since last year and raising fears that Iranian-backed fighters could be left to infiltrate the area.

In the weeks before launching their campaign to regain control of the territory, Syrian government forces massed in the governorates of in al-Quneitra and Daraa ([Haaretz](#), June 24; [AMN](#), June 25; [Gulf Today](#), June 25). Following intensified aerial bombardment, regime forces moved into eastern Daraa, capturing the villages of al-Bustan and al-Shumariya and moving on to the strategic town of town of Busra al-Hariri ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), June 24).

Alongside its Iranian backers, the Syrian forces have trumpeted their successes against fighters with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Islamic State (IS) ([SANA](#), June 21; [SANA](#), June 24). However, the jihadists only control relatively small amounts of territory in the southwest. Other

fighters are with rebel groups such as Jaish al-Thawra, an alliance of Sunni groups that came together in 2016 that fights as part of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and these will be the regime's real targets.

Quneitra and Daraa are part of a de-escalation zone that was agreed between the United States, Russia and Jordan in July last year ([al-Jazeera](#), July 9, 2017). The agreement had the effect of freezing the conflict in the area. Since then, however, the "southern front" has to an extent been forgotten, and a U.S. decision to end support for the rebels there has left them in a precarious position.

The de-escalation deal is in tatters, but the implications of the Syrian assault could be even more damaging. Jordan fears that renewed fighting will push more refugees into its territory. The Kingdom is already struggling with more than 600,000 refugees from the Syrian conflict, according to UN figures. It is locking down its border.

Meanwhile, Israel—effectively a silent partner to the de-escalation deal since the region touches the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights—also has concerns. Since 2013, Israel has conducted a humanitarian assistance mission

at the border and in the areas adjacent to the Golan ([Time of Israel](#), July 19, 2017). Treating the wounded and providing food, baby formula and medical supplies is, however, not the extent of Israel's involvement—it also backs rebel factions, including Liwaa Fursan al-Jolan and Firqat Ahrar Nawa ([Jerusalem Post](#), July 6, 2017). It fears the Syrian assault could mean an influx of Iran-backed militias to the area. It will want to keep them at a safe distance. If the rebels cannot do that, it raises the possibility of some form of direct Israeli intervention.

Russian air support has given the regime an advantage in its efforts to reclaim territory elsewhere in Syria, and it will likely do so again here. The United States has indicated it does not plan to intervene. It may be possible to obtain assurances that Iranian elements will be withdrawn after the assault—such an agreement might be enough to avoid further escalation of the conflict, but it is unlikely to be enough to ensure long-term stability in Syria's southwest.

INDONESIA: GAINS FOR THE MODERATES

Alexander Sehmer

Indonesia's provincial elections have taken place amid heightened security in the wake of a series of militant attacks. However, not only have the elections passed without incident, early indications suggest that the votes have fallen more in favor of political moderates than Islamist conservatives.

Security was tight going into the polls, with more than 170,000 security force personnel deployed to polling stations across 171 regions ([Xinhua](#), June 26; [Firstpost](#), June 27). Intelligence agencies had warned that known extremist groups were likely planning attacks. In the end, however, the elections concluded without disruption, despite reports of violence by suspected separatists in Papua ([Jakarta Post](#), June 28).

The unease ahead of the polls in the world's largest Muslim-majority nation was understandable, with the country stunned after a series of Islamic State-inspired suicide attacks that killed more than 30 people (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), June 2). The elections also followed on the heels of the sentencing of Aman Abdurrahman, the de facto leader of the Islamic State (IS) affiliate Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) ([Jakarta Post](#), June 22). Abdurrahman was sentenced to death for inciting others to commit terror attacks, including the attack by gunmen and suicide bombers in Jakarta in January 2016. He denied his teachings were behind that attack, although over the course of his trial admitted that he had urged his followers to travel to Syria to join IS ([Jakarta Post](#), May 30).

Ahead of the elections, another Islamist cleric also featured heavily in the Indonesian media, albeit for different reasons—an investigation into alleged violations of Indonesia's pornography laws was dropped against Habib Rizieq Shihab, the founder of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) ([Tempo](#), June 18; [NNC](#), June 17). Supporters of the FPI founder said the case against him had been manufactured for political reasons. The cleric has been in Saudi Arabia since the claims emerged in 2017, apparently unwilling to return to Indonesia, and still has several outstanding police complaints against him ([Jakarta Post](#), April 25, 2017).

Rizieq's Islamist vigilante group had a considerable impact on last year's Jakarta gubernatorial race, fomenting outrage over the alleged blasphemy of Jakarta's then-incumbent Chinese-Christian governor and successfully pushing for him to be jailed. In that context, Islamists had appeared increasingly assertive going into this year's elections, with analysts presenting the vote as a test for the moderate President Joko Widodo, who has pledged to protect Indonesia's pluralist traditions.

Early indications have been that the president's allies have found favor, including in West Java, the country's most populous province and a traditional stronghold for Islamic conservatives ([NewsAsia](#), June 27; [Nikkei](#), June 27). West Java has been the province to watch—success there could line things up for Widodo if, as expected, he stands in next year's presidential election.

Fugitive Bangladeshi Militants Bring Jamaat ul Mujahideen to India

Animesh Roul

A failed bomb plot that appeared to target the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, as he visited a pilgrimage site in Bihar, India, has been blamed on the militant group Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), and an emerging Indian offshoot.

On January 19, a low intensity blast on the grounds of the Tibetan monastery in Bodh Gaya caused panic among devotees of the Dalai Lama. A subsequent sweep of the vicinity—the blast occurred after the Dalai Lama had left—led to the recovery of two improvised explosive devices near the monastery's Kalachakra (Wheel of Time) prayer ground ([Indian Express](#), January 20). Investigations into the incident revealed the involvement of the Bangladesh-based JMB.

India's elite anti-terror National Investigation Agency (NIA) and Kolkata Police Special Task Force (STF) believe the JMB was planning to avenge the atrocities on Rohingya Muslims in neighboring Myanmar by targeting Buddhist pilgrims and foreign nationals—actor Richard Gere was among those who visited the Dalai Lama—who had come to listen to the Dalai Lama during his month-long stay ([New India Express](#), February 3). The NIA initiated a massive search and sweep operation in West Bengal, a well-known hideout for Bangladeshi militant fugitives. Subsequently, details of a newly emerged JMB network in India have surfaced.

Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen India

In February 2018, the Special Task Force (STF) of the Kolkata (West Bengal) police arrested at least six people from the Murshidabad and Darjeeling districts with suspected links to JMB, including two who police say were involved in the planting of IEDs in Bodh Gaya ([Hindustan Times](#), February 23). Following the arrests of the two men—who the authorities named as Azhar Hossain and

Shish Mohammad—police in the town of Dhuliyan, in Murshidabad, seized more than 200 kilograms of ammonium nitrate, 50 detonators, timers and tiffin boxes (metal lunchboxes) that were allegedly to be used to make IEDs.

Two other suspects arrested, Paigambar Shaikh and Jamirul Shaikh, revealed more incriminating details about JMB's India wing and the recruitment drive in West Bengal and Bihar. The pair reportedly confessed that fugitive JMB leaders Salahuddin Ahmed (a.k.a. Salein) and Jahidul Islam, known as "Boma" Mizan for his expertise in explosives, were the creators of Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen India (JMI) and had planned to target Buddhist pilgrimage circuits in West Bengal and Bihar. They claimed that Salein was the chief of JMI and had been instrumental in recruiting several new members, and said that at least eight units of JMI, each comprising 10-12 members, had been tasked with carrying out anti-Buddhist attacks in India ([New Indian Express](#), February 3).

The continued crackdown led to the arrest on June 11 of a suspected militant named Hazibullah, who the police claim helped in procuring explosives for the Bodh Gaya bomb plot ([DNA India](#), June 12). Hazibullah was picked up in Bandel town, in the Hooghly district of West Bengal.

Before the formal founding of JMI, the remnants of a fleeing JMB contingent were visible on Indian soil, especially during the Burdwan bombing episode of October 2014. According to India's National Investigation Agency (NIA), JMI's chief and his deputy are responsible, along with other JMI members, for an accidental explosion in 2014 in the Burdwan district of West Bengal. The Khagragarh blast, which was followed by a police raid and a subsequent arms seizure, exposed for the first time a flourishing JMB network in India ([Live Mint](#), December 1, 2014). Two JMB militants were killed in the accidental explosion and a number of others sustained severe injuries. Both NIA and Bangladesh's Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Units have already announced monetary rewards for credible information relating to JMB fugitives and its burgeoning network.

JMB Fugitives

JMI's Salein has been a senior figure in JMB since 2001. He was in charge of Sylhet-Mymensingh region in

Bangladesh, but fled Bangladesh and is in hiding. He has possibly been operating from Indian territory since he and Boma Mizan escaped from a prison van after a JMB orchestrated ambush in the Trishal locality of Mymensingh district in February 2014 ([Daily Star](#), February 23, 2014).

A committed jihadist originally from Narayanganj, Salein has been sentenced to death in Bangladesh for his role in the Mymensingh court bombing in 2007, the targeting several Christian youths in Jamalpur and the killings of Hridoy Roy in April 2003 and Joseph Gani Gomez Mandal in September 2004 ([Daily Star](#), February 21, 2013; [Daily Star](#), March 08, 2015).

A cursory look at Salein's career within JMB's rank and file suggests he had been a member of the Jamaat-e-Islami party's radical student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS). He joined JMB while studying in Tejgaon Polytechnic Institute in Dhaka, and was influenced by JMB's military chief Aatur Rahman Sunny. He was arrested in late April 2006, during a Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) operation at Pahartoli in Chittagong. Boma Mizan is presently the deputy chief of JMI and has backed Salein since his dramatic 2014 ambush and escape.

Boma Mizan, who was finally arrested in May 2009 after years of work by the Bangladesh security agencies, came onto the security radar following JMB's country-wide serial bombings on August 17, 2005. He played a major role in making more than 500 bomb attacks across Bangladesh that killed and injured more than a hundred people. His bomb-making skills were employed by JMB in a series of attacks against the Court Houses and judges in Bangladesh, between October and November 2005 ([Dhaka Tribune](#), February 23, 2014; [BDNews24.com](#), September 26, 2017). He was arrested in May 2009 in the Mirpur area of Dhaka, the Bangladeshi capital.

According to Bangladesh's investigating agencies, like many JMB operatives, Boma Mizan had received arms and explosives training from the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), an insurgent group that fought for the cause of Rohingya Muslim minorities and against alleged atrocities by Buddhists in Myanmar ([Daily Star](#), May 19, 2009). These long-standing operational links with the Rohingya group may lie behind the attempts by fugitive JMB leaders to target Buddhist pilgrimage circuits in West Bengal and Bihar.

Proselytization, Training and Armed Combat

The founding of JMI on Indian soil indicates two things—that Bangladesh’s concerted counterterror operations have pushed the JMB remnants into neighboring India in search of a safe haven, and that there has been somewhat of an ideological rift within the original JMB with the different strands adhering to either the jihadist ideals of al-Qaeda or those of Islamic State (IS).

Salein’s al-Qaeda-influenced, India-based faction is attempting to regroup and recruit new members under the banner of JMI, and its seemingly broad based jihadist objectives and geographical reach. Long before the confessions of arrested militants in February revealed the existence of JMI, Salein and his team had attempted to reinvigorate the old JMB and had broadcast their future agenda through a Bengali language media arm, Sahm al-Hind ([Dhaka Tribune](#), August 5, 2017).

JMI and Sahm al-Hind media used popular online publishing platforms like WordPress and Justpaste.it, as well as social media channels such as YouTube, to post their propaganda. In mid-July 2017, Sahm al-Hind published an interview with Salein that gave details about future activities and the objectives of his new group, although these details appear worryingly to have escaped the attention of India’s intelligence agencies. [1]

Underscoring the JMB’s reorganization as JMI and the larger agenda of jihad on the Indian subcontinent, Salein in his interview with Sahm al-Hind outlined JMI’s three main objectives: proselytization, training and armed combat with a view to establishing Islamic rule across the Indian subcontinent. According to Salein, JMI’s target would oust “unbelievers” in the “land of Allah” by force of arms. He vehemently denied the existence of any New-JMB in Bangladesh and rejected suggestions of a split in the JMB, calling the suggestion a conspiracy intended to malign the movement. He urged Muslims of the region to wage the mythical *Ghazwa tul Hind* (battle between infidels and believers in India) to establish a caliphate in the Indian subcontinent. [2].

Salein is highly critical of IS in Syria and Iraq and adheres instead to the ideals of JMB’s original influencer, al-Qaeda. In sharp contrast, the Neo-JMB faction that has dominated the militant landscape in Bangladesh in recent years and masterminded several high profile attacks in the country—including the July 2016 attack on the Holy Artisan bakery—is ideologically and operationally influenced by IS and its violent principles ([Prathom Alo](#), August 17, 2016; [Hindustan Times](#), February 10).

India’s northeastern region, including Assam and West Bengal, provides a safe haven for illegal immigrants and Islamic militants because of its porous border and poor security. The regions have predominate Muslim populations, with mosques and madrasa networks that have allowed Bangladesh-based militant groups like JMB and Harkat ul-Jihad Islami (HuJI) to raise money, material and manpower.

West Bengal’s four districts: North 24-Parganas, Murshidabad, Malda and Nadia and Assam’s Nalbari district remain major hotspots for Bangladeshi militants and have become a stronghold of JMB over the years. Bangladesh has taken stringent measures to tackle terrorism since the country suffered a series of terrorist attacks between 2013 and 2016, mostly claimed by the al-Qaeda-linked Ansarulla Bangla Team (ABT) and the IS-inspired Neo-JMB. Now JMB jihadists have spilt over into neighboring India.

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NOTES

[1] “Special interview of Emir Jamaatul Mujahideen Shaikh Salahuddin (Hafiz), (Author’s translation from Bengali language) Sahm al-Hind Media, July 21, 2017, <https://sahmalhind1.wordpress.com/2017/07/21/জামাআতুল-মুজাহিদিন-আম/>

[2] Ibid.

Boko Haram in Celebration? An Analysis of Four Years of Ramadan Videos (2015-2018)

Jacob Zenn

Since 2015, Boko Haram has released a video each year to show the group's *sallah* prayers marking Eid al-Fitr, the end of Ramadan, and this year has been no exception. [1]

Under Abubakar Shekau, Boko Haram has been among the most opaque jihadist groups in the world. Only one "outsider," a Nigerian journalist named Ahmed Salkida who has reported on the group since 2005, is known to have ventured into Boko Haram territory and to have met Shekau ([DailyPost.ng](#), April 14). This was during the negotiations for Boko Haram's release of more than 100 of the kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls, which Shekau approved in 2016.

Aside from Ahmed Salkida's articles, the court testimonies of Senegalese fighters who joined Boko Haram in Nigeria in 2014-2015, given during their trials in Dakar, and 18 hours of video footage from a Boko Haram videographer that was provided to Voice of America by a Nigerian military source last year have also offered some rare insights into the group ([VOA](#), February, 2017) ([Terrorism Monitor](#), May 4). In this context, the four videos of Boko Haram's *sallah* prayers offer an additional window into the group, even though the films would have been intended for propaganda purposes.

Because all four videos from 2015 to 2018 have come from militants loyal to Abubakar Shekau, the first was in the name of Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), while the latter three were released under Boko Haram's formal name Jamaat Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Dawah wal-Jihad. Shekau was still the leader of ISWAP when the 2015 video was released. However, by the time of the release of the next three videos in 2016, 2017 and 2018, Islamic State (IS) had selected Abu Musab al-Bar-nawi to replace him and Shekau had reverted to leading Boko Haram.

The four videos are analyzed below.

Four Sallah Videos (2015-2018)

2015

The 2015 *sallah* video features over 500 men and boys praying in rows in an open field, with one older and one younger imam leading the prayers ([jihadology.net](#), July 22, 2015). A caption in the video locates the events in Sambisa Forest, Borno State, which has long been Shekau's main base. The worshippers are surrounded by armed *hisba* (sharia enforcement) officials, while women can be seen walking in the background away from the praying men.

Though the video was propaganda, the worshippers, whether coerced or not, do not appear to be following any script. They can be seen slouching, tired and hot. The inclusion of late arriving worshippers and random people walking in the background suggests the video was not choreographed. One of the only "props" in the video is a gun placed near the imams. Possibly this was only included to add effect to the filming of the prayer.

After the prayer, three militants—they appeared to be around 20 years old—are interviewed by the video team and talk about the rewards of fasting and other religious themes. The themes specific to the insurgency they mention are a call for anti-Boko Haram vigilantes to repent, an offer of greetings "to our brothers in Iraq," and a message that "we have not been driven out of our land." [2] The latter comment was likely in reference to the group newly being part of IS therefore emphasizing that it holds territory.

2016

The 2016 *sallah* video is set in a town occupied by Boko Haram, as evidenced by the IS-style black flag seen on buildings in the background ([Vanguard](#), September 6, 2016). The video shows hundreds of men and boys filtering into a large mosque, while a Boko Haram member carrying the black flag calls people to prayer. An imam with a sword and a security escort of uniformed *hisba* enters the mosque while hundreds of men and boys sit inside and outside. Among other themes, the imam discusses Boko Haram's *daular musulunci*, or "Islamic State" in Hausa.

While the mosque is said in a caption to be in the "region of Shabab al-Islam" (presumably a renamed town),

the following scene shows a field in the “region of Sambisa.” The imam from the mosque then appears in the field with his sword to lead a prayer as *nasheeds* play over the images. In the field, the imam leads a war call, after which fighters put their guns in the air and several men race horses as the audience cheers.

The imam’s sermon in the video includes a threat to Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, as well as a claim that the group’s members remain numerous and determined, despite the military campaign against them. He also voices support for Abu Muhammed bin Muhammed Abubakar ash-Shekawi—Shekau’s full name.

Notably, at around three minutes into the video, Shekau’s deputy, Man Chari, also leads prayers in the field. In addition, while it cannot be confirmed, the mosque in which the indoor prayer is held looks similar to the mosque in which Shekau infamously declared a *dawla Islamiya* (“Islamic State”) in August 2014 ([Sahara Reporters](#), August 24, 2014). If so, this would indicate that the video was shot in not just any Boko Haram stronghold but its *main* stronghold, although that precise location is still unknown.

2017

The 2017 *sallah* video also shows hundreds of men and young male worshipers in a field, but this time alongside a number of young girls dressed in *abayas* (long cloak-like garment) ([Youtube](#), July 1, 2017). The girls are likely daughters of some of the worshippers. In the video, Shekau’s deputy Man Chari emerges from a forested area surrounded by his security escort to lead the prayer while *nasheeds* are played over the video and the IS black flag is seen planted among the worshippers. Notably, even though Boko Haram was no longer part of IS, Shekau remained publicly loyal to Abubakar al-Baghdadi.

Later in the video, several Boko Haram members are interviewed, including a group of three young fighters, a boy dressed in a sharp new uniform, and a militant who appears to be Shuaibu Moni. Moni was one of the reported Boko Haram members to have been released from prison by the Nigerian government in October 2016 in exchange for Boko Haram’s release of the first batch of Chibok schoolgirls ([Sahara Reporters](#), March 7).

After the prayer, a militant on horseback wearing blue clothing and a green turban speaks to the camera. In addition to religious themes, the militant declares the anti-Boko Haram vigilantes to be “infidels” and tells the Nigerian public that the government “wants to kill you and make your children become orphans and turn your wives into prostitutes and just get them pregnant and keep them in the refugee camps.”

He calls on the public to “come and practice the religion. Our aim is not to kill you.” Lastly, he condemns the “idols of Nigeria” and asks: “Where is Buhari who bragged that he was going to destroy us. He cannot destroy the religion of God. Where are the likes of Bush, where are the Obamas, where are the likes of Francois Hollande? They have all tried and tried.”

Before the video ends, it cuts to a teenage fighter who also praises the virtues of fasting and claims that “we just started the battle and listen, democracy is forbidden.”

2018

The most recent *sallah* video shows outdoor prayers in three areas each with what appears to be several hundred—possibly more than 1,000—men praying ([SITE](#), June 21). The locations are reportedly around Gwoza, Borno State, near the border with Cameroon. After the prayers, the video shows several fighters and civilians happily discussing breaking their fast, with one voicing praise for Shekau. In this video, unlike in the previous two, Man Chari does not appear.

Analysis

The videos offer much for analysts to consider.

First, Man Chari’s absence from the 2018 *sallah* video could indicate he has been killed or banished. He appeared not only in the prior two *sallah* videos but also in Boko Haram’s video pledge of loyalty to Abubakar al-Baghdadi in October 2015, and other sharia punishment videos before the pledge in 2014 ([jihadology.net](#), October 7, 2015). In a December 2016 leaked audio, Shekau indicated he had no conflict with Man Chari but also that Man Chari had relocated to another camp ([Vanguard](#), February 24, 2017). Considering Shekau’s whims and history of killing his commanders, it cannot be discounted that Shekau had him assassinated. However, it

is also possible that Man Chari is simply laying low in the face of the military's campaign, if not also due to pressure from Shekau.

Second, despite military pressure on Boko Haram, the fighters and civilians in the videos appear at ease. Moreover, that Man Chari could emerge so publicly in the 2016 and 2017 videos suggests Boko Haram leaders do not have nearly the same concerns about moving around in public as those of al-Qaeda in Pakistan or al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). They are comfortable in their own territory. Moreover, the mingling of Boko Haram fighters with civilians shows how, at least in periods of non-combat time, Boko Haram can become part of the community. This is presumably among the ways it recruits and receives support.

Third, the quality of the 2018 video has noticeably decreased, while in 2016 and 2017 the videos were not simply better quality but more "impressive" overall, with the large prayer in the mosque and the horse racing, among other scenes. This could reflect how, since the split in ISWAP in August 2016, members are increasingly shifting towards ISWAP and away from Boko Haram. Clearly Boko Haram still holds territory and commands influence, but over time it may remain confined to the territories around Sambisa Forest, Gwoza and the Cameroon border where its most recent *sallah* video was filmed, while ISWAP has more potential to expand geographically and spread its attacks, funding networks and ideological influence around the country and even further afield.

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NOTES

[1] The *sallah* of *Eid al-Fitr* is performed on the first day after Ramadan. *Sallah* literally means "worship" in Arabic.

[2] A translation of these three interviews is in Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa, "The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State," Hurst, April 2018.

'We Don't Need Derna Anymore': What the Battle for Derna Means for Libya's Future

Andrew McGregor

Once an important Mediterranean port in the ancient world of the Greeks and Romans, the city of Derna is currently being leveled by artillery and airstrikes supporting a ground offensive led by 76-year-old "Field Marshal" Khalifa Haftar. A former loyalist of Muammar Gaddafi, a veteran of Libya's disastrous war in Chad and a one-time CIA asset, Haftar now seeks total control of Libya while acting as the commander of the so-called Libyan National Army (LNA), nominally the military wing of the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR), a rival government to the internationally recognized Presidential Council/Government of National Accord (PC/GNA) in Tripoli. The LNA is a coalition of former revolutionaries, Saudi-influenced Islamist militias and occasionally mercenaries who fight under Haftar's direction.

Derna once played an important role in U.S. military history. In 1805, Consul William Eaton led seven U.S. marines and several hundred Greek, Arab and Turkish mercenaries on a 500 mile march from Alexandria to Derna, where his odd little army took the city from a larger Karamanli force in little more than an hour. It was the young republic's first overseas land battle and a notable success after the French had failed to take Derna five years earlier.

Today, however, it has become known as a hotbed of jihadist activity. Haftar's campaign aims to bring an end to that, but the longer the LNA bombardment continues the less certain his political future is becoming.

Derna and Islamic State

Located on the coast near the green hills of the north-eastern Jabal Akhdar region, Derna supplied over 50 fighters for the anti-American jihad in Iraq in the 2000s. In October 2014, a group of Islamist militants based in Derna (particularly dissident members of the Abu Salim Martyr's Brigade) pledged allegiance to Islamic State (IS) and took over much of the city despite opposition from

other Islamists with close ties to al-Qaeda. IS rule was marked largely by beheadings and other forms of execution, or acts of public humiliation.

On December 12, 2014, fighters opposing IS within Derna formed the Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen Derna (Derna Mujahideen Shura Council, or DMSC). This group began to drive IS militants out of Derna in June 2015, even as the LNA imposed a loose siege on the city. The DMSC fought a merciless war against IS members responsible for murders and suicide bombings in Derna, frequently executing IS militants after obtaining their confessions ([Libya Express](#), March 22, 2016).

In the meantime, the IS slaughter of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians in Sirte in February 2015 led to Egyptian airstrikes on IS strongholds in Libya, including DMSC targets in Derna. The DMSC declared they had “no relation with IS in Syria and Iraq,” adding that they also had nothing to do with the IS beheadings of Egyptian Copts hundreds of kilometers away ([Middle East Eye](#), February 19, 2015). Later that year, an American F-15 airstrike killed IS commander Abu Nabil al-Anbari (a.k.a. Wissam Najm ‘Abd Zayd al-Zubaydi or Abu Mughira al-Qahtani) just outside Derna ([BBC](#), December 7, 2015).

For a time, the IS fugitives were able to establish themselves in the industrial suburb of al-Fatayih, but were eventually forced from there in April 2016, bringing the DMSC’s two-year campaign to an end ([Libyan Express](#), April 20, 2016). Four days later, the DMSC complained that since the IS expulsion Haftar’s small air force had mounted 12 airstrikes on civilian neighborhoods in Derna, while failing to attack fleeing IS fighters who were exposed in open country ([Libyan Express](#), April 24, 2016).

The Egyptian air force bombed Derna again in May 2017 as retaliation for an attack on Christians in central Egypt that was blamed on IS militants from Derna ([Libya Herald](#), May 26, 2017). The DMSC denied any involvement in the mass-killing, reminding Cairo that the IS had been expelled from Derna, while suggesting the accusation was an attempt to divert attention from the Egyptian government’s inability to tackle its own security crisis ([Libyan Express](#), May 28, 2017). The LNA’s two-year-old siege of Derna was tightened in August, with residents describing it as “collective punishment” ([Middle East Eye](#), August 7, 2017).

The Field Marshal

Inaccurate reports of Haftar’s imminent death in April after a medical evacuation to Amman and then Paris may have sparked a succession struggle within the LNA, possibly resulting in the attempted April 18 car bomb attack on Haftar’s LNA chief-of-staff, General Abd al-Razik al-Nazuri (218 TV [Libya], via BBC Monitoring, April 18).

Haftar’s bid for power is supported by Russia, France, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has been accused by the UN of providing military helicopters and other aircraft to Haftar’s LNA in violation of the UN arms embargo. There are also reports of Haftar seeking military support from Israel ([The New Arab](#), July 27, 2017; [Libyan Express](#), December 25, 2017; [Middle East Eye](#), August 5, 2017).

Charges related to alleged LNA war crimes have been filed in France, the United States and with the International Criminal Court (ICC) ([Libya Observer](#), May 2). Haftar has refused to turn suspected war criminals in the LNA ranks over to the ICC, and has even been charged with torture and murder himself in Paris ([Middle East Confidential](#), May 3).

The Offensive Begins

As the LNA began to occupy the southern heights overlooking Derna in the third week of April, the DMSC appealed for reconciliation, extending “its hand in peace” and declaring its members were “ready to be accountable for any injustices we are proven to have committed.” Oddly, the group suggested mediation through the offices of former Libya Grand Mufti Shaykh Sadiq al-Ghariani, one of Haftar’s most bitter and vocal opponents (Libyan Social Media, via BBC Monitoring, April 22). Instead, the seizure of the heights allowed LNA artillery spotters to direct more intensive fire onto targets within Derna.

On May 7, Haftar announced a final offensive, vowing to “liberate” Derna even if “we have to evacuate all civilians from it” ([Libyan Observer](#), May 7). Muhammad Amari Zayid, a member of the Presidential Council, described the offensive as a “war crime,” saying it was being carried out to satisfy “personal ambitions” rather than serve the interests of the nation ([Libya Observer](#), May 8). Zayid succeeded in meeting with the head of

the Derna local council, who confirmed that Derna's civil and military institutions were affiliated with the PC/GNA ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), May 10).

On May 11, the DMSC reorganized as the Derna Protection Force (DPF), possibly to build a common cause with less religiously-motivated fighters who nonetheless opposed Haftar and the imposition of his own form of strongman rule across eastern Libya. Some members of the DPF were formerly aligned with Ansar al-Sharia, an Islamist militia close to al-Qaeda that dissolved in May 2017 after suffering heavy losses in fighting with the LNA and its allies ([Reuters](#), May 27, 2017). By May 15, LNA attacks had begun to strike civilian areas of Derna. Social media photos displayed indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas of Derna's Wasat al-Bilad district, with local sources saying bodies (including those of women and children) could not be recovered due to shelling and airstrikes ([Libya Observer](#), June 9).

Worried residents of Derna were also threatened in a video released by an unidentified LNA fighter in which he warned they would be treated worse than the "Khawarij," a derogatory reference to the Kharijites, a violent and despised extremist sect in early Islam. "We will demolish your houses; we will kill everyone, even civilians, we don't need Derna anymore," the man threatened ([Libya Observer](#), May 17). This was followed by an announcement from Haftar's "Information and Fighting E-Terrorism Unit" that they had a list of 21,000 "terrorists" they were seeking in the city of 125-150,000 people ([Libya Observer](#), May 27).

A veteran Egyptian jihadist and *qadi* (religious judge), Umar Rifai Jumaa Surur (a.k.a. Abu Abdallah al-Masri), was killed in a May 21 airstrike on Derna, according to an LNA spokesman ([Al-Wasat](#) [Cairo], May 21; [Al-Sharq al-Awsat](#), June 11). Surur was alleged to have acted as a recruiter of jihadists headed for Syria, Iraq and Egypt ([Egypt Today](#), May 21). Known for his strong opposition to IS, Surur was formerly a lieutenant of Hisham Ali al-Ashmawy, an Egyptian military officer turned militant and an expert in tactics and weapons ([al-Arabiya](#), June 10; see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), October 31, 2015). Two other militant clerics, Abu Zayd al-Shilwi and Abu Umar Abd al-Salam al-Awami, were killed the same day (Telegram Messaging via BBC Monitoring, June 11). The LNA also suffered losses—on May 22, the LNA announced the death in combat of 36th Brigade comman-

der Brigadier Abd al-Hamid Warfali during clashes southwest of Derna ([Libya Observer](#), May 23).

Nonetheless, Haftar announced on May 24 that the end of "four consecutive years of holy struggle" was approaching in Derna, while proclaiming he had ordered his men not to "harm the city's residents or their property" ([Middle East Monitor](#), May 24). The LNA commander also called on the families of DPF fighters to pressure their kinsmen to abandon arms in the struggle against the LNA and seek the "fair trial" being offered ([Reuters](#), May 25).

Egyptian airstrikes coordinated with the LNA struck central Derna and the Fatayeh industrial zone on May 26, 2017, followed by claims to have destroyed the DPF headquarters ([Libyan Express](#), May 27, 2017; [Middle East Eye](#), May 29). Drone attacks and heavy shelling forced the DPF to withdraw from al-Fatayeh on May 29, even as Derna's local council issued an appeal to all local, regional and international organizations to open Derna's port for humanitarian assistance, describing conditions as "disastrous" ([Anadolou Agency](#), May 28; [Libya Observer](#), May 29).

The LNA Enters Derna

By June 1, the LNA claimed to have taken al-Fatayih and the heights overlooking the Bab al-Tobruk district of Derna ([Middle East Eye](#), June 1). Shaykh Sadiq al-Ghari-ani took to Libyan TV to describe the attack during the holy month of Ramadan as "preposterous." Urging all Libyans to support the citizens of Derna with civil disobedience if necessary, al-Ghari-ani declared: "What is happening in Derna is not a war on terrorism, but a war on all Libyans in order to subdue them" (Tanasuh TV, via [Libya Observer](#), June 2).

The attacking force consisted of four battalions of LNA troops, with two battalions working their way into Derna from the west and two from the east, beginning on June 4. Troop movement is being directed by the Umar Mukhtar Operations Room, under the command of Major General Salim al-Rafadi. The troops are strengthened by elements of the al-Saiqa Special Forces brigade and supported by artillery and warplanes belonging to the LNA, Egypt and the UAE ([The National](#) [Abu Dhabi], June 5). France, which aided Haftar in his three-year siege of Benghazi, is reported to have secretly provided Haftar with a newly-obtained Beechcraft King Air 350

reconnaissance airplane for use over Derna ([Libya Observer](#), June 3; [Libyan Express](#), November 1, 2016). Publically, France is promoting a peace process intended to lead to presidential and parliamentary elections in December.

At the forefront of the LNA offensive is Wanis Bukhamada's Saiqa Special Forces. Bukhamada insists his unit is "fighting members of terrorist groups operating under a variety of names ... Libyan fighters ... must resolve their issues with the Libyan state through the courts ... As for foreign fighters, they have no place in Libya" (*al-Wasat* via BBC Monitoring, May 20). LNA forces captured Derna's security chief, Yahya Usta Umar, on June 8. Though appointed by the GNA, Haftar's representatives described Umar as an al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist ([Libyan Express](#), June 8).

With the LNA having developed a reputation for the mistreatment and even murder of prisoners, Haftar announced he had asked his troops to "respect legal procedures relating to prisoners" during the battle for Derna ([AfricaNews](#), June 5). By June 8, the LNA claimed to control 75 percent of the city, with Haftar setting the final stage of the conflict in religious terms during a speech to his troops: "After four years of holy struggle against the Kharijites, we are close to the liberation of Derna" ([Egypt Today](#), June 8).

By June 12, the LNA claimed to control the port and the rest of the city, save for an inner core of some 10 square kilometers. There fighting was described as "very heavy," with LNA losses due to desperate DPF suicide attacks ([Middle East Monitor](#), June 12; [Libya Herald](#), June 12). Mines and IEDs have taken the largest toll on LNA attackers.

LNA Brigadier General Abd al-Salam al-Hassi insisted that LNA forces would protect the lives and property of Derna's civilian population, but reports from inside Derna have described civilian deaths under bombardment and an inability to retrieve victims due to constant fire ([Libya Herald](#), June 6; [Libyan Express](#), June 7). Another LNA official dismissed reports of Egyptian troops participating in the assault on Derna as an attempt by the Muslim Brotherhood to diminish the significance of the LNA's impending victory, although he did acknowledge "high-level coordination and cooperation" with Egyptian officials ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), June 10).

A report by Swiss-based NGO Reach detailed extensive damage from the siege to Derna's roads and its water, electric and sewage systems. Schools, mosques and bridges have been bombed, and those attempting to escape the destruction face harassment or violence at checkpoints if they manage to get through networks of mines and snipers. [1] Shortages of food and medicine have been exacerbated by daily shelling and airstrikes while access to water and electricity remains intermittent at best.

The Cost of Victory

It is likely that Haftar's decision to turn away from his march on Tripoli to consolidate his rear in Cyrenaica was strongly influenced by his supporters in Egypt, France and the UAE, all of whom regard Derna as a dangerous spawning ground for Islamist militants.

As the battle for Derna rages on, the international community looks away, having no particular objection to the elimination of this long-time Islamist hotbed, despite the similarity of Haftar's tactics to those used by Gaddafi in 2011. This time, there is no imposition of a "no-fly zone" or mobilization of the international community. Italy has stated its readiness to supply humanitarian aid if "access is granted by the parties involved," but this and a call for restraint from the UN Security Council constitute nearly the whole of international concern for the residents of Derna ([Libya Observer](#), June 2). While the LNA claims to be working toward supplying "liberated" areas of Derna, other observers warn of an impending "humanitarian catastrophe" as the fighting continues ([Middle East Eye](#), June 12). As the LNA commander is fond of referring to all his political opponents as "terrorists," the question is whether the license given to him by the international community in Derna will apply to future attacks on Tripoli and other centers of anti-Haftar resistance.

It took three years for Haftar to take Benghazi, with repeated proclamations of victory routinely followed by reports of continued resistance. DPF fighters show little sign they are about to capitulate. Rather than being "hours away" from total victory, as the LNA claimed on June 11, an extended period of urban warfare punctuated by deadly suicide attacks seems more likely. There is also a danger that the lightly-disciplined LNA fighters may commit abuses over time that could generate international disapproval. If this happens, it will have a

serious impact on Haftar's ability to bring western Libya under his control before the elections scheduled for December. For Haftar, a quick victory is essential—prolonged civilian suffering combined with the brutal realities of urban combat and a perceived inability to secure Derna could easily damage the aging Field Marshal's political prospects and standing in the international community.

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NOTES

[1] "Libya: Public services break down as conflict escalates in encircled city of Derna," Reach, Geneva, June 5, 2018 http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach_lby_situationoverview_ra_derna_jun2018_0.pdf