

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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Uighur Jihadism Fades Into Obscurity

Jacob Zenn

A decade ago, at the onset of the Syrian civil war, Uighur militants joined the forefront of the jihadist movement. Originally based in Afghanistan, they comprised a sub-group of the Islamic Movement in Uzbekistan (IMU) and allied with the Taliban and were loyal to al-Qaeda. However, since 2011 Uighur militants in the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) have fought in major battles in and around Idlib. The group also became notorious for being relatively hardline among the groups aligned with al-Qaeda in Idlib, including through the TIP’s

vandalizing shrines it perceived as “polytheistic” (Stj-sy.org, April 6, 2021).

The TIP fighters’ relocation from Afghanistan to Syria in 2011 was facilitated by Turkey’s accommodative policy not only toward Uighurs, but also toward anti-government Syrian rebels generally. However, the stalemate in Idlib and other parts of western Syria in the past few years has resulted in the TIP reducing the scale and frequency of its operations. Rather than conducting attacks consistently, the TIP is returning to being primarily a “propaganda group with a militant wing” (Terrorism Monitor, March 17, 2011). The latest TIP propaganda from Syria included:

- A video monologue from a militant calling on fighters to reject the “rebels” of the Islamic State, who are rivals to and disobedient toward al-Qaeda and, therefore, also the TIP ([Twitter.com/@Anti_IbnMuljim](https://twitter.com/Anti_IbnMuljim), April 25).
- A video of fighters wearing military fatigues meeting in a tent in an unknown location in Idlib ([Twitter.com/@venkatesh_Ragu](https://twitter.com/venkatesh_Ragu), February 23).
- A photostream of fighters in Lattakia province engaging in *ribat* (fortifying territory) ([Twitter.com/@war_noir](https://twitter.com/war_noir), February 10).

At the same time, the TIP has continued to produce nasheeds (Islamic hymns) about waging jihad and pleasing God, usually with interspersed images of previous TIP battles in Syria and the famous, but now “occupied,” Id-Kah mosque in Kashgar, Xinjiang Province, China, which the TIP refers to as “East Turkistan” ([Streamable.com](https://streamable.com), January 30).”

China, meanwhile, continues to impose international pressure on countries to crack down on the TIP, which it asserts is active in the Middle East, South Asia, Central Asia, and other regions. However, China may be more satisfied than in previous years with Turkey’s increasingly less tolerant policy toward the TIP and certainly less vocal government position regarding China’s treatment of the Uighurs in Xinjiang ([Xinhua](https://xinhua.com), February 10). Since 2020, for example, there have been reports of Uighurs in exile in Turkey, and especially those who participate in anti-China protests, coming under pressure from Turkish authorities and even being repatriated to China (dw.com, February 28, 2021). Turkey has also placed bans on businesses that allegedly supplied groups

allied with al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) in Syria, including those run by Uighurs (atalayar.com, February 18).

In the TIP’s original base, Afghanistan, the Taliban has warmed up to China, which has coincided with the Taliban placing restrictions on the militant activities of the remaining Uighurs in Afghanistan (rferl.org, October 5, 2021). While this Taliban policy, like Turkey’s, places severe limitations on Uighur militancy in order to appease China, it may present opportunities for IS. During IS’s heyday in Syria, it had attempted to recruit TIP Uighurs to defect to IS through a coordinated propaganda campaign targeting Uighurs and accusing al-Qaeda of being insufficiently committed to jihad (aljazeera.com, March 1, 2017). More recently, Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) has featured a Uighur suicide bomber while criticizing the Taliban’s obeisance of China’s foreign policy demands (scmp.com, October 10, 2021).

Because TIP members are otherwise restrained by al-Qaeda-allied factions in Syria and the Taliban in Afghanistan, some may seek out IS to continue their jihad. On the other hand, veteran TIP members may simply choose to live a relatively quiet life in rebel-occupied Idlib and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and not cause any trouble. This would likely contribute to the TIP’s fading into obscurity, but allow veteran TIP members to live out their lives in greater safety than on the battlefield or in Chinese custody.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Is Islamic State Entrenching in Southern Thailand?

Jacob Zenn

The Thai government achieved its short-term objectives of seeing a relatively peaceful Ramadan period in the country's south in June (nikkei.com, May 30). Before Ramadan, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) and the Thai government had pledged not to attack each other during Ramadan as they continued peace talks in Kuala Lumpur regarding some form of autonomy for southern Thailand's ethnic Muslim Malays ([Terrorism Monitor](http://Terrorism_Monitor), April 22). An attack, however, occurred during Ramadan involving a roadside bomb that killed one civilian carried out by the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO), which has sought to undermine and spoil BRN's talks with the Thai government (benarnews.org, May 26). Since one of the Thai government's demands is not to "internationalize" the conflict in southern Thailand, PULO's historic links to Middle Eastern countries and the previous training of its senior fighters abroad in Libya puts it at odds with the Thai government, which has excluded it from any negotiations (thepeninsulaqatar.com, April 9, 2016).

Besides the PULO attack during Ramadan, which was considered minor, there was also a major attack immediately after Ramadan on a police station, customs post, and convenience store located along the border between Thailand and Malaysia (benarnews.org, May 26). No organization claimed responsibility for the operation, which led to the burning of a police station and three police officers being injured by gunfire and grenades thrown at their station. These attacks coincided with more traditional PULO and BRN-style attacks on electric poles near the border, although the

lack of any claim in that attack, which would be expected if PULO or BRN were responsible, remains notable. Some hitherto unknown group may very well have taken up arms.

Not mentioned by either the Thai or Malaysian authorities as suspects in the major attacks along the border was Islamic State (IS), or specifically IS in East Asia Province (ISEAP), which has previously incorporated the Philippines and Indonesia, but has been much less active, if at all, in Thailand itself. Nevertheless, ISEAP has revealed an interest in Thailand in recent months. For example, on April 15, just before Ramadan, a pro-IS media outlet claimed that ISEAP detonated a roadside bomb to kill "a Buddhist" and seriously injured two "kuffar [infidel]" military personnel in Patani, southern Thailand ([Twitter/@G88Daniele](https://twitter.com/G88Daniele), April 15). Three months earlier, in January, pro-IS media also released a photo series of militants in southern Thailand who had seemingly pledged loyalty to IS and were engaging in military training, including firing rockets, detonating improvised explosives, and performing calisthenics ([Twitter/@war_noir](https://twitter.com/war_noir), January 10).

Although the IS presence in Indonesia and the Philippines is not as strong as it was several years ago, both of those countries are still stronger IS battlegrounds than southern Thailand. Nevertheless, until a more stable and lasting peace is achieved between the Thai government and BRN, if not other factions like PULO, there will be opportunities for IS to infiltrate southern Thailand through disgruntled and radical breakaway factions. Thus far, however, southern Thailand has proven to be beyond the reach of any substantive IS infiltration and, to the credit of the rebel factions, they

have generally not reached out to IS, al-Qaeda, or jihadist actors for support.

The lack of any significant jihadist infiltration of the southern Thai conflict also makes it easier for Malaysia to act as a mediator with the militant factions, while allowing the Thai government to have grounds to negotiate with the factions, which have generally accepted the government's demand to desist from any attempts to "internationalize" the conflict.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Sri Lanka Struggles to Deliver Justice for Easter Sunday Terror Victims

Animesh Roul

On April 21, amid an unprecedented economic meltdown, political turmoil, and social unrest, Sri Lanka observed the third anniversary of the Islamic State (IS)-claimed Easter Sunday terror attacks. To mark the occasion, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa promised once again to punish those behind the carnage that killed 260 people and injured over 500, who were mostly Christian worshippers at Easter services, foreign nationals, and tourists in hotels. Rajapaksa reiterated his government's commitment to ensure justice for all the victims of the Easter terror attacks. Despite these promises, Sri Lanka's Catholic minority community has remained distraught in the face of government inaction and still suspects links between intelligence officials and the perpetrators of the violence ([Times of India](#), July 15, 2021; [Colombo Page](#), February 18).

On April 12, Sri Lankan Defence Secretary Kamal Gunaratne provided details about the status of the investigation to douse

growing criticism against the government for the delay in holding a trial and prosecuting the perpetrators. According to the information he shared, 735 people have been taken into custody over the Easter attacks and among them, 196 people remain in custody. While 493 suspects were released on bail, court cases have been filed against 81 individuals. According to Gunaratne, 52 Sri Lankan expatriates were brought back to the country over their links to the Easter Sunday attack ([Ministry of Defence](#), April 13). The probe also confirmed the role of Naufar Moulavi of National Thawheed Jamaath (NTJ) as the mastermind of the Easter violence. While he propagated IS ideology in the country, NTJ's Zahran Hashim led the band of suicide bombers ([Daily FT](#), April 21, 2021; [Ada Derana](#), April 12). [1]

The Easter attacks targeted three churches in Colombo, Negombo and Batticaloa, three luxury hotels in Colombo, and several more places in Dehiwala and Dematagoda in a series of suicide bombings. These coordinated attacks were carried out by two local Islamist organizations, NTJ and Jamathei Millathu Ibrahim (JMI), which allied with IS and claimed responsibility for the attack through IS's Amaq news agency ([Terrorism Monitor](#), April 9, 2021). Weeks after the attack, on May 14, 2019, the government banned NTJ, JMI and another group, Wilayat as-Seylani (WAS), under emergency regulations ([Twitter/MFA Sri Lanka](#), May 15, 2019). In August last year, Sri Lanka police filed over 23,270 charges against 25 accused, including Naufar Moulavi, the leader of the NTJ. The charges were filed under the country's anti-terror law and the trial was scheduled for mid-May 2022. ([Colombo Page](#), March 4).

The Presidential Commission of Inquiry (PCoI) into the Easter violence submitted its report to President Rajapaksa in February 2021 and then to the parliament in April 2021. This February, all 88 volumes, including those with evidence and related witness records, were submitted to the parliament for further action ([The](#)

[Island](#), February 23). Refuting the cover-up and conspiracy accusations from the church and civil society organizations, the government clarified that vital information and recommendations of the PCoI were earlier withheld only because of their direct bearing on the national security.

Growing Clamor for Justice

Despite repeated reassurances, the Rajapaksa government, which is often criticized for being autocratic, has received widespread criticism over the lack of action and delay in the legal proceedings. The Catholic Church remains at the forefront demanding justice for the victims and action against then-president Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe for their failure to prevent the attacks during their tenure ([News First](#) July 12, 2021). The most scathing criticism came from the head of the Catholic Church, Archbishop of Colombo Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, who blamed current President Rajapaksa and his government for political conspiracy and exploiting the terror events in his favour. Cardinal Ranjith, for example, held Rajapaksa responsible for the Easter conspiracy that allegedly set the stage for his win in the subsequent November 2019 presidential election. Questions have also been raised about the intent of the incumbent government to protect former President Sirisena, who was blamed for his lackadaisical approach and negligence in preventing the Easter violence during his tenure as president ([The Morning](#), April 22).

Cardinal Ranjith further sought international intervention and met with Pope Francis in the Vatican in April with a 60-member delegation, including victims of the Easter attack ([Vatican News](#), April 27). Pope Francis urged the Rajapaksa government to reveal the truth behind the Easter bombings in his address. Earlier, in March, Cardinal Ranjith briefed Michelle Bachelet, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, on the sidelines of the 49th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHCR) to

request its member states put pressure on the Buddhist-dominated Sri Lankan government for an impartial investigation ([Colombo Gazette](#), March 2). The UNHCR and other international rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, have already expressed reservations about the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and called for a moratorium on its use ([Tamil Guardian](#), March 3).

In the wake of Easter violence, the Sri Lankan authorities introduced new legislation under the PTA to detain suspects involved in violence that creates religious, racial, or communal disharmony and to force them to undergo rehabilitation for up to a year. Other measures, such as banning the face veil (burqa) and cracking down on Islamic seminaries, have also invited international criticism and generated pressure on the government to introduce amendments to the law ([The Hindu](#), April 27, 2021; [Indian Express](#), March 22). The amendments included provisions for reducing the detention period, providing legal access to PTA detainees, facilitating communications for detainees with relatives, and allowing bail for detainees ([News First](#), January 28). However, these amendments were opposed by nationalist Buddhist groups who came out in support of the PTA in its current form and cited the threat of transnational jihad reaching the shores of Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

After months of economic uncertainty and social unrest, Sri Lanka is limping back to normalcy with new Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe back at the helm. As the country expects political stability and economic recovery in the coming months, justice for the Easter terror victims will remain a priority for the new administration. If the government continues to leave the Easter terror case unresolved, it may alienate the minority Catholic community and further embolden the covert Islamist networks in the country supporting jihadist ideals.

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Islamic State in Khorasan Province's Rocket Attack in Tajikistan

Nurbek Bekmurazev

On May 7, several rockets were launched from the Hojagor district of Takhar province, Afghanistan into the neighboring Panj district in Tajikistan ([Radio Ozodi](#), May 8). The Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) released a statement on the same day to claim responsibility for the attack ([Eurasianet](#) May 9). On May 8, the State Committee of National Security of Tajikistan (GKNB) claimed that "bullets accidentally ended up on the territory of Tajikistan" after a shootout between Taliban and ISKP forces near the Afghan-Tajik border.

The GKNB statement also noted the situation on the border was stable, and the Taliban was conducting operations to locate and disarm the perpetrators ([Khovar](#), May 8). Taliban officials confirmed this by delivering a statement on May 9 promising that "efforts are being made to arrest the perpetrators of the rocket attack from Afghanistan into Tajikistan ([Pajhwok Afghan News](#), May 9)." Several Tajik analysts and authorities nevertheless doubted the sincerity of this promise and blamed the Taliban for the attack.

Although there were no reported casualties or material damage, ISKP's presence in Afghanistan is becoming more worrisome for the international community, and especially Central Asian countries. This was ISKP's second rocket attack in Central Asia in a three-week period and prompted

conflicting accounts and explanations, with blame assigned to both the Taliban and ISKP ([Radio Ozodlik](#), April 19). This article, however, explains why ISKP was clearly behind the latest attack in Tajikistan and what its motivations were.

Mistrust Between Tajikistan and the Taliban

Although the Tajik government did not explicitly blame the Taliban, several Tajik experts claimed that the attack occurred with the Taliban's blessing in order to exert pressure on the Tajik government to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. The attack was, according to this view, retribution by the Taliban for the Tajik government's decision to provide sanctuary and support to the National Resistance Front (NRF) ([Radio Ozodi](#), May 10). The NRF diplomatically and militarily opposes the Taliban, is based in the northern provinces of Afghanistan, and is led by Ahmad Massoud, the son of the deceased leader of the Afghan-Soviet War Ahmad Shah Massoud. Between May 4-8, the NRF targeted Taliban fighters in the Andarab district of Baghlan province, allegedly killing 27 ([Aamaj News](#), May 9).

Fueling speculations were comments from Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who was Afghanistan's prime minister for several months in 1996 and was one of the leaders of the 1980s and 1990s mujahideen factions. On May 6, a day before the ISKP attack and following Hekmatyar's meeting with the Taliban's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hekmatyar delivered a speech. In it, he blamed the Tajik government for providing sanctuary to the NRF and stated that this was equivalent to declaring war on Afghanistan ([Asia Plus](#), May 10).

It may be far-fetched to interpret Hekmatyar's comments as any indication that the Taliban were somehow responsible for the rocket attack against Tajikistan, however. First of all, ISKP and the Taliban are mortal enemies, and the Taliban would

never empower and provide publicity to its fiercest enemy by allowing ISKP to carry out and claim the attack. Second, the attack dented the Taliban's legitimacy and credibility by giving Central Asian states another reason to question the Taliban as a security guarantor. Third, Hekmatyar does not hold any official post in the Taliban, so his comments cannot be seen as authoritative.

Most likely, Hekmatyar's comments are related to the commencement of NRF attacks on the Taliban in early May. The Taliban are frustrated by these attacks and the fact that the Tajik government is providing a sanctuary to the NRF 130 kilometers south of Dushanbe in Farkhor, where NRF fighters can recuperate, receive training, and travel to the front lines in Afghanistan ([Asia Plus](#), May 10). Thus, it is likely that the Taliban used Hekmatyar as their talking head to send a message to the Tajik government that the Taliban leadership is aware of Tajikistan's dealings with the NRF and will not tolerate such relations in the future, even though the Taliban itself had no involvement in the rocket attack.

ISKP's Growing Capacity

With the Taliban eliminated as a possible perpetrator of the rocket attack in Tajikistan, there should be no doubt that ISKP was the perpetrator. First and foremost, ISKP claimed responsibility for it and published video proof with a man firing seven rockets in the direction of Tajikistan ([Twitter/@war_noir](#), May 9). Moreover, Tajikistan has been the target of other ISKP terrorist attacks in the past, so this attack is not something that was totally unprecedented ([Sputnik Tajikistan](#), November 9, 2019; [Asia Plus](#), August 1, 2018).

Second, the attack continues the trend of ISKP coming into its own after the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. In less than a year, the number of ISKP operatives has increased from 2,000

to roughly 4,000, with some new recruits coming from recently released prisoners in Afghanistan ([PDF/UN Security Council](#), February 3). As a result, in the last four months of 2021, ISKP carried out 119 attacks in Afghanistan, a steep increase from the 39 which took place during the same period in 2020 ([New York Times](#), May 1).

Conclusion

This ISKP attack in Tajikistan has dented the Taliban's credibility as a security partner and undermined its promise that the territory of Afghanistan will not be used for launching terrorist attacks on foreign countries. The attack also represents ISKP's transnational ambitions in Central Asia and growing capabilities that can create instability beyond Afghanistan's borders. The conflicting narratives about the Taliban having a role in the attack is also indicative of the deep mistrust between Tajikistan and other Central Asian states and the Taliban.

Libya's Persistent Political Polarization Amid Islamic State's bid to Remain Relevant

Dario Cristiani

Introduction

Following the October 2020 ceasefire and successful United Nations-brokered Libyan Political Dialogue Forum Process (LPDF), Libya finally saw the formation of a new, unified government, which ended almost six years of division. During those six years, the country had two governments: the internationally recognized Government of the National Accord (GNA) led by Fayez al-Sarraj and the eastern-based government led by Abdullah al-Thani. This eastern-based government was supported

by the House of Representatives (the parliament elected in 2014 and led by Aguila Saleh) and was de facto dominated by the Sirte-born warlord Khalifa Haftar, who was leader of the Libyan National Army/Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LNA/LAAF). [1]

However, after Haftar's military failed, in spite of significant external support by several countries (the United Arab Emirates, Russia, Egypt, and France), to conquer Tripoli due to the Turkish military intervention in November 2019, conditions changed ([Al-Monitor](#), June 4, 2020, [The Daily Sabah](#), December 26, 2019, [Al-Jazeera](#), November 13, 2019). Rapidly, the forces fighting alongside Haftar's militia, including sub-Saharan African mercenaries primarily from Sudan and Chad, Russian Wagner Group fighters, and Syrians brought by Russia to Libya, had to retreat. By April 2020, it had become obvious that the offensive failed. In August 2020, Haftar also had to end the oil blockade he launched in January 2020, and in October 2020 the parties agreed to a ceasefire that paved the way for UN-backed political dialogue.

The success of the LPDF brought about the establishment of the Government of National Unity (GNU). Abdel Hamid Dbeibeh, a businessman from Misrata, became the new interim Prime Minister. Mohammad Menfi became the head of the Presidency Council. The primary task of the interim government was to oversee the electoral process that should have brought Libyans to vote for a new president and a new parliament on December 24, 2021.

However, the elections were not held in the end because of mounting disagreements between different Libyan interest groups concerning procedures, timing and

outcomes of the process. Moreover, the particularly pro-active and somewhat populist role that interim Prime Minister Dbeibeh played in using public money to strengthen his position, and the fact that he was ready to run for the presidency (even though he agreed not to when taking over his role), triggered adverse reactions from many of his rivals ([The Arab Weekly](#), March 31; [Asharq Al-Awsat](#), February, 19; [Majalla](#), November 21, 2021). This resulted in a new institutional and political stalemate as Dbeibeh's opponents started working together to limit his power while hoping to force a change of government.

The Genesis of the Government of National Stability

This dynamic, as has often happened in Libya's history, pushed former arch-enemies to cooperate against what they perceived as the common enemy, who in this specific case was Dbeibeh. Thus, in response to Dbeibeh's political machinations, in December 2021 Fathi Bashagha and Ahmed Maiteeg, two other key political figures from Misrata and crucial personalities in the GNA as the Minister of the Interior and Deputy Prime Minister respectively, initiated a process of rapprochement with the eastern-based forces represented by Haftar and Saleh ([Al-Wasat](#), December 21). This process culminated in the appointment of Bashagha as the new Prime Minister in February and the launch of the new Government of National Stability (GNS) one month after Bashagha received a vote of confidence from a part of the House of Representatives ([The Libya Herald](#), March 2).

Dbeibeh did not recognize the parliament's vote and reiterated that he would only hand over power to a government elected by the Libyan people. Being also the

interim Defense Minister, he then placed the armed forces on alert and closed Libyan airspace, which was reopened only two weeks later to prevent Bashagha's arrival ([The Arab Weekly](#), March 23). A few days after the vote of confidence, Bashagha and the groups supporting him tried entering Tripoli, but were blocked by the militias that remained loyal to the GNU. Bashagha tried to enter Tripoli again in May, but this attempt triggered violent clashes with the city's militias. The violence forced Bashagha to leave with an announcement that the GNS would work from Sirte instead ([The Libya Observer](#), May 17; [Asharq Al-Wasat](#), May 18).

Haftar's Wild Card: The Oil Blockade

The return of political and institutional polarization created incentives for all actors involved to use their territorial control and military capacities to pressure rivals. As the political standoff continued, the Representatives of the Eastern Region in the 5+5 Military Committee, who were linked to Haftar, called for a ban on oil exports, the closure of the coastal road, and stopped their work in the committee ([The Libya Herald](#), April 10). A few days later, oil production stopped, with the National Oil Corporation (NOC) declaring force majeure at Zueitina, El Sharara, and El Feel. The blockade was justified as a response to the grievances of local workers and tribal groups, who launched protests and blocked production ([The New Arab](#), April 27).

The past has shown that there was a direct connection between Haftar's decision and the situation at oil fields and terminals. In 2020, the oil blockade was lifted after Haftar's intervention ([Libyan Express](#), August 19, 2020). As such, since his forces together with Russian Wagner mercenaries

have continued to control most of the territory in which Libyan oil resources are located, there is a casual connection between his decisions and the return of the oil blockade. This decision to control the oil fields was even suggested by Wagner Group commanders a few weeks earlier ([Al Monitor](#), June 26, 2020, [The Libya Observer](#), March 12, 2021). The Libyan oil output thus went from one million barrels per day (bpd) to 450,000 bpd in the second half of April 2022. Immediately after the launch of the blockade, Dbeibeh called upon the public prosecutor to launch an investigation into the closure of oil facilities and export terminals ([Ain Libya](#), April 20).

Haftar already tried and failed to use an oil blockade in January 2020 to force the GNA to surrender. The current blockade will prevent Libya from taking advantage of the world's high global hydrocarbon prices while at the same time forcing them to suffer the affects of inflation and food supply shortages due to the war in Ukraine ([al-Jazeera](#), April 26). Moreover, the freezing of oil revenues at the Libyan Foreign Bank, which was announced on May 14 and was a move to undermine the GNU's ability to use oil-related funds, is exacerbating these problems even further.

According to a press-release issued by the House of Representatives, the freezing will last until "the establishment of guarantees and a mechanism for all Libyans to benefit from this income, in a manner that achieves justice and equality for all." ([Libyan News Agency](#), May 14). While the blockade and the freezing inevitably put pressure on the GNU, it also risks backfiring, particularly in the areas in which Haftar and his forces are most present. Something similar happened in 2020 when the oil blockade launched by Haftar undermined power production in eastern

Libya, leading to protests and riots. The oil blockade and the freezing of revenues may bring the same problems related to electricity production, but could also exacerbate issues related to food, goods' shortage and mounting inflation.

Is the Islamic State a Real Problem in Southern Libya?

Against the above-mentioned backdrop, Libya is also facing a return of the Islamic State (IS). On April 19, LNA/LAAF sources claimed that a car bomb exploded near a military camp in Umm Al-Aranib in the southwest of the country, blaming IS for the attack ([Maghreb Voices](#), April 19). This violence followed similar operations that occurred in previous months. In January, two IS-claimed attacks targeted LNA/LAAF forces, prompting authorities to launch a security operation which resulted in the killing of several IS fighters ([Al Wasat](#), February 7).

IS had officially returned to operational status in Libya as early as June 2021 after an almost two-year hiatus. The group had become silent after airstrikes allegedly decimated its leadership in September 2019 and put an end to the operational revival that the group experienced in Libya between 2017 and 2019, particularly in the south. IS's landmark attack was on June 6, 2021 when a truck exploded at a Mazig checkpoint north of Sabha, killing at least two people, including a senior police officer, and injuring four more people ([Libyan Express](#), June 8, [Al-Monitor](#), June 7).

Later that same day, IS claimed responsibility for the Mazig checkpoint attack, with the Amaq news agency publishing photos and footage of the car bomb used and the suicide bomber,

Mohammed Al-Muhajer ([The Libya Observer](#), June 13, 2021). Haftar's forces used the series of attacks from the Mazig checkpoint onwards as a pretext to launch a renewed military campaign in the south ([The Libya Observer](#), June 19). This push into the south regained momentum shortly after Bashagha's Tripoli fiasco and amid mounting tensions with some local groups, including several Tebu leaders. Haftar's forces were also motivated by the need to fight Islamists and secure the Libyan borders with Chad, where instability is on the rise ([Akhbar Libya 24](#), May 31; [Libya Channel](#), May 31).

It is notable that Haftar did something similar during his military campaign in Western Libya in 2019 when he tried to strengthen his military positions in the south before launching the main operation. However, as noted by the wave of IS attacks that the LNA/LAAF forces suffered over the past few weeks, this attempt to strengthen the LNA/LAAF presence in southern Libya has come with a cost for Haftar. While IS in Libya is far from being the systemic threat it represented from 2014 to 2016 and, to some extent, 2018, the group can still inflict some damage. Haftar's militiamen, who are more exposed than the Sirte-born warlords, will pay the higher price in human and logistic terms.

Conclusion

IS's operational return must be monitored, although it should not be overestimated. According to Ibrahim Bushnaf, the GNU National Security Advisor, IS in Libya does not represent a severe concern at the moment, as the organization is trying to portray itself as more potent than it is in actuality, and its presence is limited to several outposts in the south of the country ([Libya Al-Hadath](#), April 3). In the past, IS

exploited domestic fragmentation and political polarization in Libya to make inroads into the country. Two examples from history include their attempts to strengthen their presence in Sirte in 2014 or reorganizing itself in the south after the group was dislodged from Sirte in late 2016.

It is clear that IS these days does not have the same capacity it had in 2014 or 2017-2018. The return of political polarization and institutional duality, with the relative incentives to undermine rivals as shown by the recent oil blockade, will nevertheless favor fragmentation and chaos, sharply increasing the risk of military confrontation between militias and groups supporting the GNU and the GNS, respectively. This bodes well for IS in Libya.

Although the operational capacities of IS in Libya have been so weakened that it does not represent a systemic threat, security fragmentation and political polarization can favor its bid to maintain a presence in Libya in line with its principles to “remain, attack, and expand” ([Terrorism Monitor](#), August 9, 2019).

Notes

[1] For some time, Libya had three competing governments, if one counts the so-called Government of National Salvation, headed by Omar al-Hassi from September 2014 to March 2015 and then Khalifa al-Ghwell from March 2015 to March 2017, despite some interruptions. The GNS was part of the General National Congress (GNA), which was the Parliament elected in 2012 that did not accept the election of the House of Representatives and remained in power by creating its own government.

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