House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade

Libya's Terrorist Descent:
Causes and Solutions

THOMAS JOSCELYN

Senior Fellow
Foundation for Defense of Democracies

Senior Editor
The Long War Journal

Washington, DC
September 27, 2016

FDD
FOUNDATION FOR
DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACIES

www.defenddemocracy.org

Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the turmoil in Libya. Obviously, the multi-sided conflict in Libya is complex, with various forces pulling the country in multiple directions. My testimony today focuses on the jihadist groups operating inside Libya, especially the Islamic State's arm and groups belonging to al Qaeda's network. I am going to emphasize five key points:

1. The Islamic State is on the verge of losing its safe haven in Sirte, Libya. The loss of Sirte would be a major blow to the so-called caliphate, as Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's organization has invested significant resources in this state-building project. From the Islamic State's perspective, Sirte was one of the most important cities under its control. This was true even though most of the city's citizens had fled the jihadists' occupation. By controlling Sirte, the Islamic State was able to portray its "caliphate" as having significant territory outside of Iraq and Syria. If Baghdadi's loyalists are cleared from Sirte in the coming weeks, then the U.S. and its allies should trumpet the group's loss. During its rise to power, the Islamic State's motto was "remaining and expanding." This was a key part of the organization's marketing message. But in Libya, as in Iraq and Syria, it is no longer true.

2. Despite losing its grip on Sirte and the surrounding towns and villages, however, the Islamic State will retain a presence inside Libya. The group has cadres in Benghazi and elsewhere. The Islamic State's leaders likely evacuated some of their men from Sirte as the offensive on the city progressed. It is important to note that even though the Islamic State is on the verge of a significant defeat, the effort required a robust commitment by local Libyan ground forces, as well as more than 170 "precision" American airstrikes to date. As the Islamic State's men have been cleared block by block from Sirte, they have demonstrated that they continue maintain a strong operational capacity, launching suicide bombings in neighborhoods they've lost and killing dozens of their Libyan enemies. The U.S. and its partners will have to make sure that they hold Sirte once it is cleared, as well as prevent the Islamic State from seizing significant terrain elsewhere.

3. The Islamic State's loss of Sirte will be viewed in jihadist circles as a vindication of al Qaeda's strategy. Al Qaeda's senior leaders, including Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri, repeatedly warned that the premature declaration of an Islamic state harms the jihadists' cause. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) emir, Abdulmalek Droukdel, has made the same argument. Al Qaeda has consistently argued that a jihadist state cannot survive if the U.S. and its allies decide to intervene. This is exactly what happened in Sirte.

4. Some assume that, unlike the Islamic State, al Qaeda does not seek to control territory and build Islamic emirates (states). But this is an erroneous assumption. A wealth of evidence shows that this is, in fact, al Qaeda's primary goal. However, al Qaeda and the Islamic State have very different strategies for achieving this same end. AQIM and its allies briefly controlled much of Mali beginning in 2012. Documents recovered in Mali show that AQIM was laying the groundwork for an Islamic state. But Droukdel and his advisors concluded that their effort needed to be firmly rooted in the host society, so AQIM was willing to partner with tribes and organizations that did not share its ideology. AQIM is following a version of this same strategy inside Libya today and has been working to embed itself in various local groups and communities. The Islamic State's model for state-building is top-down authoritarian. In the view of Baghdadi and his key advisors, all Muslims must submit to the so-called caliphate's authority. Al Qaeda's follows a bottom-up plan, which means that the organization is seeking to spread the jihadist ideology, win popular support and embed itself within local societies. Al Qaeda and AQIM, which is openly loyal to Ayman al Zawahiri, are not close to achieving their goals in many areas. But the al Qaeda network remains deeper than many assume.

5. In addition to the assistance the U.S. military provides local forces, the U.S. government should work to expose al Qaeda's network inside Libya. Sun light is a key part of any plan to combat al Qaeda's clandestine strategy. Al Qaeda's senior leadership has dispatched operatives to Libya in the past. AQIM doesn't typically advertise its presence in Libya, but has clearly backed groups such as Ansar al Sharia in Libya and the

Mujahideen Shura Council in Derna. Indeed, al Qaeda has worked under multiple brand names in Libya.

The importance of Sirte to the Islamic State

In May, the Islamic State's spokesman, Abu Muhammad al Adnani, revealed just how important Sirte is to the caliphate-building project. Adnani, who was subsequently killed in an airstrike in August, mentioned Sirte alongside Raqqa, Syria and Mosul, Iraq in a speech entitled, "That They Live By Proof." Raqqa and Mosul are the de facto capitals of the group's self-declared caliphate. By rhetorically elevating Sirte to the same status as these two cities, Adnani signaled just how significant the North African locale really was for the Islamic State's long-term plans.

Indeed, the Islamic State dispatched key figures to Libya to build a beachhead for the organization. In November 2015, for instance, the U.S. military conducted its first airstrike against an Islamic State leader in Libya. According to the Department of Defense, the bombing targeted Abu Nabil, also known as Wissam Najm Abd Zayd al Zubaydi, "an Iraqi national who was a longtime al Qaeda operative and the senior ISIL leader in Libya."[1] Nabil "may have been the spokesman in the February 2015 Coptic Christian execution video," DOD noted, referring to a mass execution on Libya's shores that the Islamic State celebrated in one of its typically grotesque propaganda productions. Nabil was hardly the only senior Islamic State leader sent to Libya. The organization sent trained cadres of fighters from North Africa to Libya to help with its expansion plans, and also worked to recruit defectors from existing jihadist organizations, such as Ansar al Sharia.[2]

The same month that Adnani delivered his speech on Mosul, Raqqa and Sirte (May 2015), Al Bunyan Al Marsoos ("Solid Structure") operations room began its offensive on the Islamic

---

[1] See: http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/628954/statement-from-pentagon-press-secretary-peter-cook-on-us-strike-in-libya

[2] However, Ansar al Shara as a whole did not defect to the Islamic State, but instead remained loyal to al Qaeda.

State's Libyan stronghold. Al Bunyan Al Marsoos draws fighters from militias based in Misrata and is allied with Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA). The assault quickly gained ground, but stalled by July. On August 1, the U.S. began to launch airstrikes in support of the operations room. As of September 25, according to U.S. Africa Command, there have been a total of 175 airstrikes as part of Operation Odyssey Lightning.[3]

During testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on September 22, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter explained that he and other U.S. officials had "expressed concern that if left untended, Libya could be the next ISIL [Islamic State] headquarters, as ISIL's control over the city of Sirte was seen as their contingency plan for where they would go when they lost Raqqa and Mosul."[4] However, because of the American airstrikes and the heavy load carried by local fighters, the Islamic State's safe haven had been "reduced to a single square kilometer" in "a single neighborhood," Carter said. A map produced by Al Bunyan Al Marsoos echoed this assessment.[5]

Therefore, the Islamic State appears to be on the verge of a key loss. However, we should be mindful that the Islamic State's manpower has been drastically underestimated in the past. Given that much of Libya's south is remote and ungoverned, the Islamic State could find areas to regroup. Also, Baghdadi's men are fighting in Benghazi and elsewhere. In my view, their presence in Benghazi has been exaggerated, to a degree, but they clearly have cadres fighting on the ground inside the city today. The Islamic State may have also redeployed some of its forces to Benghazi and Derna as a result of the situation in Sirte. Earlier this year, the group was forced out of Derna by jihadists connected to al Qaeda's network. But it is possible that some fighters will return to Derna, or the city's outskirts, now that they no longer have a safe haven in Sirte.

Al Qaeda's long-term approach to state-building

---

3 See: http://www.africom.mil/NewsByCategory/pressrelease/28413/u-s-airstrikes-in-support-of-gna-sept-23-to-25
4 See: http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Carter_09-22-16.pdf
5 The map can be viewed here: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/islamic-states-safe-haven-in-sirte-libya-shrinks-to-a-single-neighborhood.php

Unlike the Islamic State, which advertises and even exaggerates its presence in some areas, al Qaeda is keen to avoid scrutiny. Al Qaeda has developed an entirely different strategy for operating in countries such as Libya. Al Qaeda sees jihadi state-building as a long-term endeavor that requires strategic patience. The Islamic State deliberately played off of this strategy to quickly grow in size, capitalizing on younger jihadis' and new recruits' impatience. In essence, the Islamic State marketed itself by asking a simple question: Why wait for al Qaeda's caliphate to come in the future, or maybe never, when you can come fight for the "caliphate" today?

The Islamic State's approach allowed it to mushroom in the short-term, but its long-term liabilities are now being exposed in Iraq, Syria and Libya. Al Qaeda knew all along that the Islamic State's caliphate claim would prove to be tenuous, and al Qaeda's strategy will now be vindicated in some jihadis' eyes. In this section, I am going to reference three key documents to illuminate al Qaeda's strategy. All three of them were produced by either AQIM or another part of al Qaeda.

An especially important document for understanding al Qaeda's thinking is a letter written by AQIM's emir, Abdulmalek Droukdel, to the shura council of Ansar Dine, which AQIM used as its local face.[6] Although Droukdel's missive was written with Mali in mind, the lessons he outlined are equally applicable to Libya. Droukdel argued that "the great powers with hegemony over the international situation, despite their weakness and their retreat caused by military exhaustion and the financial crisis, still have many cards to play that enable them to prevent the creation of an Islamic state in Azawad ruled by the jihadis and Islamists."

That is, in Droukdel's view, Western powers could easily overrun a jihadi state ruled by al Qaeda and its partners. Even though AQIM and its allies seized much of Mali in 2012, Droukdel urged caution. "We must not go too far or take risks in our decisions or imagine that this project is a stable Islamic state," Droukdel wrote. Instead, the jihadis should view it as an "important golden

---

[6] The document was first reported on by Rukmini Callimachi, then with the Associated Press and now with *The New York Times*. The memo can be found online here: http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-manifesto.pdf

opportunity to extend bridges to the various sectors and parts of Azawad society" in northern Mali, including Arabs, the Tuareg people, and other Africans. This would "end the situation of political and social and intellectual separation (or isolation) between the Mujahideen and these sectors, particularly the big tribes, and the main rebel movements with their various ideologies, and the elite of Azawad society, its clerics, its groupings, its individuals and its noble forces." Simply put, Droukdel was concerned with building broader popular support for the jihadists' agenda.

Droukdel wanted to make sure that the jihadists' attempt at governance had a local face, such that AQIM did not "monopolize the political and military stage" and was not "at the forefront." AQIM's chief argued that they should work closely with other parties, such as the Azawad Liberation Movement, to administer the new state. Sharia law should be implemented only gradually, in Droukdel's opinion, as the population was not accustomed to living under al Qaeda's Draconian penal code. (Al Qaeda's branches have adopted this same approach in Syria and Yemen.)

Should the emirate fall, which Droukdel thought was "very probable," then the jihadists would not bear the responsibility by themselves and would have at least planted a "good seed in this fertile soil…so that the tree will grow more quickly" in the future. "We look forward to seeing this tree as it will be: stable and magnificent," Droukdel wrote. The AQIM chief mixed metaphors by also comparing the jihadist project in Mali to a "small newborn" who is "crawling on [his] knees, and has not yet stood on [his] two legs."

Droukdel concluded that AQIM had "two missions" and combining them created a "true dilemma." AQIM wanted to both preserve the "Azawad Islamic project," meaning the effort to build an Islamist state, and also continue its "global jihadi project." The latter is a reference to AQIM's commitment to carrying out terrorist operations throughout the region. Droukdel and his advisors came up with two proposals. In the first scenario, AQIM would subordinate itself to the local ruler. AQIM would "be under the emirate of Ansar Dine" such that AQIM's "emir would follow their emir" and AQIM's "opinion would follow their opinion." This would be the case for all "internal activity," meaning "all activity connected to participating in bearing the

responsibilities of the liberated areas." But all "external activity" connected to the "global jihad…would be independent of them (Ansar Dine)" and AQIM "would ensure that none of that activity or its repercussions is attributed to them [Ansar Dine], as care must be taken over negative impacts on the project of the state."[7]

In Droukdel's "second proposal," some of al Qaeda's mujahideen "would be set aside and put under the complete control of the emir of Ansar Dine to participate in bearing the burden of running the affairs of the liberated cities." The remaining al Qaeda members would be "completely independent of Ansar Dine and its activity would be limited to jihadi action outside the region."[8]

AQIM never got the chance to fully implement either of one of the strategies Droukdel outlined in his memo. Just as Droukdel feared, the jihadists' nascent state in Mali was quickly dismantled after France intervened in early 2013. But Droukdel's memo illustrates just how different al Qaeda's thinking is from the Islamic State's. Whereas Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's men have advertised their presence in the form of "provinces" of the so-called caliphate, al Qaeda's loyalists have decided that it is foolish to declare Islamic emirates, or states, anywhere. In fact, Al Qaeda's leaders often do not want outside observers to know that their organization is present at all.

There is ample evidence demonstrating that AQIM has followed this same strategy in Libya. In March, al Qaeda released the seventh issue of its Al Masra newsletter. The Arabic publication included an article featuring a senior AQIM leader known as Abu Abdul Ilah Ahmed. Ahmed discussed AQIM's game plan for Libya at length, saying the group had the opportunity to establish an Islamic state in Libya, but decided such a move would be premature. Instead, Ahmed said, AQIM decided to back groups such Ansar al Sharia, the Abu Salim Martyrs

---

[7] It should be noted that Droukdel's words invite a comparison to the current situation in Syria, where al Qaeda's leadership did not want anti-Western plotting to spoil the jihadis' role in the war against Bashar al Assad's regime. In Syria, as elsewhere, al Qaeda embedded itself deeply within the fabric of the insurgency, making it difficult, if not impossible, to separate the jihadis from more acceptable rebel groups.

[8] Again, one can easily draw a comparison to the situation in Syria, where Al Nusrah Front has been rebranded as Jabhat Fath al Sham and distanced itself from anti-Western terrorism in an attempt to maintain a clean brand for the fight against Assad.

Brigade (ASMB) in Derna, and the faithful shura councils that were established in several Libyan cities. Ahmed stressed that Ansar al Sharia and ASMB have the same goals as AQIM, as they are all fighting to establish sharia in Libya.[9] AQIM's man added that it is the "duty" of all mujahideen to "unite," but such an effort requires "time" and "sacrifices from all parties."

An especially telling passage in Ahmed's discussion focused on whether or not AQIM has an official arm in Libya. Ahmed portrayed AQIM as being one with the Libyan people in the fight against "America and its Crusader alliance," adding that AQIM will back the Libyan people against the French, who are "violating the sanctity of Libya." AQIM is not focused on collecting pledges of allegiance at this juncture, Ahmed pointed out, but is instead rallying the people against foreign "aggression." Ahmed framed AQIM's war as part of a long jihadi tradition dating back to Omar al Mukhtar, who resisted Italian forces in Libya in the early part of the 20th Century. This is a consistent AQIM theme, as the group has portrayed its men as the "progeny of Omar al Mukhtar."[10]

Another key document is an analysis by a prolific jihadi writer known as Abdullah bin Mohammed, who has been identified as an al Qaeda member and strategist.[11] Bin Mohammed has a large audience on social media, with more than 350,000 accounts following him (@strateeeegy) on Twitter. In early 2015, bin Mohammed published an article entitled, "Political Guerrilla Warfare," in which he argued that jihadists needed to be more flexible in their dealings with other Islamist parties.

Bin Mohammed likened his ideas to the military strategy Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda's other leaders devised for confronting the West. Bin Mohammed explained that Bin Laden realized al Qaeda could not defeat the U.S. and its allies in a straight fight, so al Qaeda relied on high-profile terrorist attacks and guerrilla warfare to confront its superior foes. "The military

---

[9] The ASMB is one of the major players in the Mujahideen Shura Council in Derna.

[10] See Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb squadron ambushed in Libya," *The Long War Journal*, November 30, 2015. Available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/11/aqim-squadron-ambushed-in-libya.php

[11] Ali Hashem, "Al-Qaeda theorist calls for infiltrating political systems," *Al Monitor,* May 29, 2015. (Available at: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/al-qaeda-political-system-infiltration.html)

calculations proved to us that an open confrontation with a strong enemy like the U.S. is military suicide," Bin Mohammed explained in an interview.[12] "Therefore we had to go a different way in military confrontation, and in politics an open confrontation like declaring a state is also political suicide, as the West has the power to weaken us, pressure our societies and at the end uproot us as they did in Afghanistan and Iraq." [13] For these reasons, bin Mohammed explained, "we have to build a new strategy that can enhance our resilience." [14] Bin Mohammed emphasized bin Laden's warning that prematurely declaring an Islamic state is tantamount to "political suicide," as the jihadis' enemies can easily overwhelm them.

Bin Mohammed pointed to the example of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), whose members have forged alliances with Islamist political parties in Libya. This made it difficult, if not impossible, for the West to thwart the former LIFG members' political designs and also inoculated them from Western counterterrorism pressure. One summary of Bin Mohammed's thesis noted that the LIFG's men have built "solid alliances with other Islamic and revolutionary groups" and are "flexible toward the outside world."[15] Bin Mohammed claimed the LIFG had gone so far as to issue a "fatwa" allowing them "to participate in the democratic regime after they demanded that Sharia be a main source of legislation." In the next step, "they will start working on building their Islamic regime."[16]

Some aspects of Bin Mohammed's thesis proved to be especially controversial within al Qaeda circles. While some saw the wisdom in the strategy Bin Mohammed advocated, others (such as the pro-al Qaeda cleric Abu Qatada) think he went too far. Regardless, al Qaeda is following a version of Bin Mohammed's plan in Libya, Syria and elsewhere. For instance, writing in *Al Monitor* in May 2015, Ali Hashem noted:

> It is believed that Mohammed's strategy of political guerrilla war has made its way to being adopted by some of al-Qaeda's affiliated groups, primarily in Syria. Reports have

---

[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

suggested that the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra, might be moving toward a rebranding phase as a result of pressure exerted by allies in the region that want to legitimize the group so it can play a role in Syria's future. The idea to create the Army of Conquest (Jaish al-Fatah), with all the Islamist groups fighting under one banner legitimized by regional and international backers, might well have been influenced by Mohammed's theory.[17]

This is exactly what happened more than one year later. As we reported at *The Long War Journal*, Al Nusrah Front co-founded the Jaysh al Fath (Jaish al-Fatah) alliance as a way to pool the resources of various rebel groups and to prevent al Qaeda's paramilitary army in Syria from being isolated from other factions. Then, in late July 2016, Nusra was rebranded as Jabhat Fath al Sham ("Conquest of the Levant Front") in an attempt to further embed al Qaeda within the Syrian insurgency and to stymie American counterterrorism efforts.

There are direct parallels to the situation in Libya, where al Qaeda has long sought to hide its hand.

Al Qaeda's clandestine presence in Libya

I have outlined al Qaeda's clandestine network in previous testimony and articles, drawing on U.S. and UN terrorism designations, an analysis authored by a Defense Department shop in 2012, primary source evidence produced by the jihadists themselves, as well as other evidence.[18]

---

[17] Ibid.

[18] See, for example, the following: (1) "Global al Qaeda: Affiliates, objectives, and future challenges," Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, July 18, 2013. (Available at: http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA18/20130718/101155/HHRG-113-FA18-Wstate-JoscelynT-20130718.pdf); (2) "Terrorism in Africa: The Imminent Threat to the United States," Testimony before the House Committee on Homeland Security's Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, April 29, 2015. (Available at: http://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM05/20150429/103382/HHRG-114-HM05-Wstate-JoscelynT-20150429.pdf); (3) "Al Qaeda's plan for Libya highlighted in congressional report," *The Long War Journal*, September 21, 2012. (Available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/09/al_qaedas_plan_for_l.php)

I will not repeat all of that analysis here, but a brief update is necessary because the situation has evolved since I last testified. Three key facts are worth highlighting.

First, the al Qaeda-aligned groups have also sustained serious losses, especially in Benghazi. There, Ansar al Sharia and the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC), both of which are part of the al Qaeda network, had led the jihadists in fighting against General Khalifa al Haftar's forces.[19] But this past summer, the jihadists reorganized themselves under the banner of the Benghazi Defense Brigades (BDB). Both Ansar al Sharia and the BRSC are clearly allied with, or part of, the BDB.[20] This is yet another indication that al Qaeda-affiliated jihadists are using front groups and pooling their resources with other organizations inside Libya.

Second, Al Qaeda and affiliated jihadi groups in Libya are rallying around Sheikh Sadiq Al Gharyani, a senior religious figure who is sometimes described as "Libya's Mufti." In July, a statement attributed to Mokhtar Belmokhtar was released online.[21] Belmokhtar heaped praise on Gharyani, saying he "practices what he preaches by exposing the truth in the face of falsehood and its adherents." Belmokhtar asked Allah to "strengthen" Gharyani and his followers such that they are a "fortress for sharia." The Mujahideen Shura Council in Derna (MSCD), which has its own al Qaeda links,[22] views Gharyani has its spiritual figurehead. For instance, the MSCD co-signed a new charter for governing Derna in mid-August. The "charter," which was released on the MSCD's social media sites, referred to Gharyani as the "sole authoritative religious reference." The BDB itself is openly aligned with Gharyani. These moves should be view with suspicion, as it appears AQIM and its Libyan branches are endorsing a "local" face as the rightful governing authority, just as Droukdel advocated in the letter mentioned above.

---

[19] A series of articles demonstrating Ansar al Sharia's ties to the al Qaeda network can be found here: http://www.longwarjournal.org/tags/ansar-al-sharia-libya.

[20] See: Thomas Joscelyn, "Presence of French special forces in Libya sets off controversy," *The Long War Journal*, July 22, 2016. (Available at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/presence-of-french-special-forces-in-libya-sets-off-controversy.php)

[21] Belmokhtar has been reportedly killed on multiple occasions, but his demise was never confirmed. The jihadists, including AQIM, are acting as if he is alive and survived an American airstrike in Libya last year. Thus far, AQIM has not released a proof of life audio or video from Belmokhtar, only written statements. Belmokhtar's Al Murabitoon reunited with AQIM last year. The move was praised by multiple al Qaeda figures.

[22] See: http://www.longwarjournal.org/tags/mujahideen-shura-council-in-derna

Third, AQIM and affiliated groups are seeking to rally support against Western intervention in Libya. For example, Gharyani, AQIM, the BDB and others have strongly denounced France's presence in Benghazi and elsewhere in Libya. Special forces from at least four Western nations (US, UK, France, an Italy) are reportedly operating inside Libya currently. This makes it all the more important for the U.S. and its allies to expose al Qaeda's network inside the country.