



**Clingendael**

Netherlands Institute of International Relations

# Islamic State franchising

Tribes, transnational jihadi networks  
and generational shifts

**Rivka Azoulay**

**CRU report**

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**About CRU**

The Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' is a think tank and diplomatic academy on international affairs. The Conflict Research Unit (CRU) is a specialized team within the Institute, conducting applied, policy-oriented research and developing practical tools that assist national and multilateral governmental and non-governmental organizations in their engagement in fragile and conflict-affected situations.

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# Executive Summary

The brutal decapitation of 21 Copts on the north-western shores of Libya shown on 16 February 2015 in a video – ‘A Message signed with blood to the Nations of the Cross’ – by jihadis claiming to be part of the Islamic State (IS) – focused international attention on Libya as a new area of IS expansion. However, IS had already announced the extension of its Caliphate three months earlier in an audio message to a series of self-declared new provinces in Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, the Sinai and Yemen. Yet these events were largely drowned out by the intensification of the violent struggle against the group in Iraq and Syria. Consequently, there has been little analysis so far of this apparent IS expansion.

This report seeks to fill that gap by shedding light on the nature of IS expansion into different areas of the Middle East and North Africa, the challenges it faces in doing so, and the impact it has on local power dynamics, in particular with respect to local jihadi groups. By comparing the Sinai and Libya as different cases of IS expansion, the report offers tentative conclusions on the IS ‘model of expansion’ through franchising. It focuses on the incentives and conditions for, as well as objectives and strategies of, expansion and brand affiliation.

Recent IS expansion is reminiscent of similar efforts by al-Qaeda (AQ) in the mid-2000s when that organisation created al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). This happened at a time when AQ was facing a splintering global jihadi movement and a range of parallel battlefields – such as Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan. It sought to remain relevant in this tumult of fragmentation via a strategy of franchising, but that proved costly to al-Qaeda Core (AQ Core), the mother organisation of these franchises. Local groups tended to prioritise their own political agendas to the detriment of AQ’s focus on the ‘far enemy’ (i.e. Western countries, mainly the United States). Local groups that adhered to the AQ Core preference and shifted their focus to the far enemy tended to lose domestic support. A final problem for AQ Core was its difficulty in effectively establishing and enforcing corporate guidelines to manage its franchises. For example, a franchise such as AQI could commit extreme brutalities against civilians and fellow Muslims that went against clear AQ Core instructions and damaged AQ’s brand by alienating Sunna masses from its ideology and activities.

The IS franchising model, on which its expansion is based, is different from AQ’s model in at least one key respect, namely that it does not prioritise attacking the far enemy. Combined with a much thinner ideology that reflects its primarily tribal and Sunna identity, this makes its expansion more ideologically flexible. In addition, the early focus of IS on securing territorial gains through co-optation of, or violent imposition over, existing local social structures (often tribal), has given it more operational experience in effectively adapting to local circumstances – to the mutual benefit of itself and local jihadi groups.

The fact that IS can work in such a nimble operational manner that is less constrained by ideology, results in large part from the changing nature of jihadi insurgencies since the mid-2000s. In addition, the largely failed Arab revolutions, the resilience of old regime elites, and the crackdown on Islamists in places like Libya, Egypt and Syria, have contributed to the radicalisation of groups that previously preferred more peaceful forms of contestation. The new jihadi groups that have arisen have greatly profited from the violent political transitions of the past years to strengthen their grip over local political economies, including by engaging

in criminal activities for the purpose of self-financing. They tend to operate in the grey zone between smuggling networks and jihadism, and to exploit the grievances of communities neglected by the state. It is this localised jihadism blended with 'gangsterism' that has allowed new groups to control territory and offer limited forms of stability, often by creating pockets of instability, inciting locals to turn to them for stability.

Marginalisation and state neglect, or even failure, are clear conditions for the success of such groups. Such factors, for example, have allowed IS to re-emerge from the Iraqi al-Anbar province with the support of marginalised local tribes. Outside Iraq and Syria, the places where IS presence is strongest also exhibit these characteristics. The Sinai and Libya's Cyrenaica province are cases in point, as both areas have historically been neglected and marginalised by Cairo and Tripoli respectively. IS has capitalised on the failure of these states, and perhaps more broadly on the failure of the nation state model as it existed in the Middle East and North Africa region prior to the Arab revolutions. It has done so through an extremely radical interpretation of Sunna Islam, tribal politics that play on existing generational divisions within tribes, and shared battlefield histories gained on the sands of Iraq against US forces from 2003 onwards.

However, IS expansion should not be exaggerated. Until now, only in Libya and Egypt are there signs of serious IS activism and territorial control outside of Syria and Iraq. In the Egyptian Sinai, the new IS franchise – Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis – does not actually control much territory (if any at all) and is constrained by a strong Egyptian military and a heavy security crackdown. In Libya, IS faces competition from a range of jihadi groups and it is only in the eastern city of Derna that its affiliates are in real control. In Sirte and Benghazi they merely participate in the battle against General Khalifah Hiftar and his allies alongside other jihadi groups.

Yet, the outreach of IS is broader than territorial control, loyalty and a command structure that extends to its Caliph. It also has many 'soft' elements for expansion at its disposal, such as personal networks of foreign fighters that could yet be mobilised to greater effect. It is clear that personal, face-to-face interaction is still a major relay mechanism for the transmission and mutation of transnational movements. Such networks have often laid the groundwork for IS expansion. Meanwhile, emerging evidence also suggests that where the leadership of local jihadi groups has not (yet) pledged allegiance to IS, group members often display sympathies towards IS nonetheless. Moreover, in Libya's fragmented jihadi landscape, local jihadi groups tend to cooperate with the IS branch. This is facilitated by the presence of a common enemy and the absence of deeply entrenched groups.

Finally, IS expansion serves objectives of propaganda as much as of power. While not every announced expansion may rest on a tangible IS operational structure, it does resonate globally to reinforce IS's image of strength and growth. It appears that the timing of IS expansions tends to be strategically chosen to coincide with moments when IS core or local branches-to-be face military setbacks. For example, the announcement of a number of new branches in November 2014 by al-Baghdadi followed rumours of his death after an airstrike. Also, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, the Derna Youth Islamic Council, Ansar al-Sharia Libya's leader (Abu Ayadh al-Tunisi), and recently Boko Haram, have all announced their pledges to IS when they faced a significant crackdown. Pledges presumably allow these groups to benefit from the IS brand name, which enables them to attract more fighters and to access IS resources. For IS core, the intensification of high-profile attacks carried out by members of its Libya and Egypt branches might well be a tactical move to deflect attention from the battlefield challenges it faces in Syria and Iraq.

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# Methodology

This report is based mostly on analysis of existing academic literature, media sources and policy documents on the Islamic State in English and Arabic. All referenced online sources were consulted between mid-January and mid-March 2015. The primary materials produced by the Islamic State and al-Qaeda themselves also feature prominently as sources. The written, audio and video communications of these groups provide important insights into their propaganda strategy and doctrinal positions on issues like the conduct of warfare, the treatment of prisoners, the use of *'takfir'*, and dealing with the wider Muslim community. The author collected and analysed such documents between the summer of 2014 and early 2015. In addition, a few interviews were conducted in February 2015 with local experts in Egypt and Libya. Given the sensitivity of the topic, they were carried out on condition of anonymity. The report has taken account of the fast developing situation until mid-March 2015.

While great care has been taken to compare sources, evidence and arguments, the fact remains that secrecy surrounds much of the Islamic State's activity, and the available evidence is patchy in some areas. Consequently, this report should be read as a contribution to an evolving debate and will hopefully shed more clarity on the group's motives, activities and plans.

# Abbreviations

AAB	Abdullah Azzam Brigades
AaS	Ansar al-Sharia
ABM	Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis
AQ	al-Qaeda
AQAP	al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
AQI	al-Qaeda in Iraq
AQIM	al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
ASMB	Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade
DYIC	Derna Youth Islamic Council
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GCSP	Geneva Centre for Security Policy
GSPC	Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
HoR	House of Representatives (Libya)
IS	Islamic State
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
JaN	Jabhat al-Nusra
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
TSJ	al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad

# Introduction: “The Islamic State remains and expands”

On 13 November 2014, the Islamic State (IS) Caliph al-Baghdadi issued a rare audio message, ‘*Even if the disbelievers hate it*’, in which he acknowledged for the first time that a number of groups in the Middle East and North Africa had pledged their allegiance to IS.<sup>1</sup> The statement followed a series of audio pledges of allegiance three days earlier by groups of mujahedeen in Libya, Yemen and Saudi Arabia, as well as by Jund al-Khilafah (Algeria) and Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (Sinai Peninsula). The timing and rapid confirmation of these pledges by al-Baghdadi make it likely that they were well prepared in advance. They also reveal a clear IS strategy for expansion beyond Syria and Iraq.

In his message, al-Baghdadi criticises what he dubs the ‘Crusader’ coalition, its weakness and failure, and mocks the Arab rulers who are allied to the West. Instead of being weakened, IS would “remain and expand” (*baqia wa tatamadad*).<sup>2</sup> The groups would be incorporated into IS as new provinces (*wilayat*): Wilayat al-Jaza’ir (Algeria), Wilayat al-Barqah, Wilayat Tarablus and Wilayat Fezzan (Libya), Wilayat al-Haramayn (Saudi Arabia), and Wilayat Yemen (Yemen). The new provinces would fall directly under IS command with appointed governors and their original names would disappear. Al-Baghdadi also called upon Muslims living in the vicinities of these wilayat to go to their local governor and pledge their allegiance to the Caliph. In *Dabiq* Issue 5 (21 November 2014),<sup>3</sup> in an article titled ‘Remaining and Expanding’, IS sheds further light on its annexations. It reiterates that these groups are now in direct contact with IS and receive directives from the Caliph. As al-Baghdadi’s November message did not refer to pledges of allegiance by non-Arab groups (i.e. in Pakistan, Philippines, Indonesia, Nigeria or the Caucasus),<sup>4</sup> IS explains that the leaders of these groups still need to contact IS to receive “directives and information” from the Caliphate. Since the November speech, a new wilayat was announced outside the Middle East and North Africa, ‘Wilayat Khorasan’ in Pakistan, following the announcement of pledges of allegiance from former members of the Afghan and Pakistan Taliban.<sup>5</sup> On 7 March 2015, the Nigerian group, Boko Haram, pledged allegiance to IS. Not much later, the IS leadership accepted this pledge in an audio message of its spokesman, Al-Adnani, and called upon jihadists to migrate to West Africa as a new land for jihad. Although material ties between the two groups are a source of speculation, this pledge of allegiance does reinforce IS ideological expansion to sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>6</sup>

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1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Od9nDhjvxPQ>

2 On the origins of the slogan ‘*baqia*’ see: [http://religion.info/french/articles/article\\_653.shtml](http://religion.info/french/articles/article_653.shtml)

3 <http://www.clarionproject.org/news/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq>

4 One can think of the Mujahedeen East Timor, the Caliphate and Jihad Movement in Pakistan, Ansar al-Khalifah, Abu Sayaaf, BIFF and BJM in the Philippines and Jundullah in Pakistan. For more information: <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isis-global-messaging-strategy-fact-sheet-december-2014>

5 <http://jihadology.net/category/the-islamic-state/wilayat-khorasan/>. There is a growing trend for mid-ranking officers from the Taliban to defect to the newly created IS branch. See: [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/02/pakistani\\_taliban\\_em.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/02/pakistani_taliban_em.php)

6 Boko Haram’s leaning towards IS had already been observed in January by expert Aaron Zeelin, referring to the swift upgrade of the quality of the group’s media productions as most likely being a consequence of IS support for its media arm.

<http://jihadology.net/2015/01/27/the-clairvoyant-boko-harams-media-and-the-islamic-state-connection/>

Against this background, the aim of this report is to increase understanding of the factors that have contributed to the rise of IS, how it positions itself within the global jihadi movement and what its rationale, strategies and modalities for expansion are. Section 1 positions the Islamic State in the global jihadi movement (and includes a brief analysis of how it differs from al-Qaeda in terms of doctrine and strategy) and examines the factors that have contributed to its rise. Section 2 provides an account of al-Qaeda's franchising experience as well as initial pointers on the IS model of expansion. Section 3 examines Wilayat Sinai as an example of IS expansion. It focuses on the dynamics behind the pledge of allegiance given by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) to IS and its implications for local political dynamics. Section 4 takes a close look at the establishment of three 'IS provinces' in Libya as further examples of IS expansion. Finally, the conclusion weaves together the initial pointers on why and how IS expands with the findings of the two case studies.

# 1. The Islamic State within the global jihadi movement

The Islamic State can be seen a product of major geopolitical and generational changes that have recently been unfolding in the Middle East and North Africa region. The former includes 9/11, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the election of Shia-led governments in Iraq from 2005 onwards. These developments led to the marginalisation of Iraq's Sunna population and the imprisonment of many who later came to lead the IS. Generational changes include the process within the global jihadi movement that shifted the focus of such groups from the 'far' to the 'near' enemy, and introduced more indiscriminate violence as a political-religious objective in itself.

## Factor #1: Geopolitical changes in the Middle East

The geopolitical context in which IS matured is key to understanding IS and its contradictions, i.e. being archaic and post-modern, mixing jihadism with elements of Ba'athism and tribalism, and reconciling reactionary localism with progressive globalism. The 9/11 attacks, the fall of the Ba'athist regime in 2003 and US interventionism in Iraq provided fertile grounds for 'marriages of interests' between seemingly antithetical parties.<sup>7</sup> The Syrian and Iranian regimes, fearing a possible domino-effect after the imposed regime change in Iraq, turned a blind eye to people crossing the Lebanese and Afghan borders to participate in jihad against the US. Jihadis were considered to be potential allies, but in reality have become dangerous, having, since 2006, turned against their tacit backers by shifting the focus from US targets to the Shia.

The Arab revolutions of 2011 further complicated the matter, as Sunna Arab Gulf states joined the Syrian conflict out of frustration with US inaction towards what was fast becoming a protracted conflict 'next door' in which their arch rival, Iran, looked to gain the most.<sup>8</sup> Until the end of 2013, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) governments turned a blind eye to their citizens' support of extremist groups in Syria. In part they saw it as a means of allowing frustrated Islamists to 'blow off steam' by supporting foreign jihad rather than pushing for reforms at home. Until 2013, following revelations about support from GCC individuals to jihadis, external financial support allowed groups such as what IS is today to grow.<sup>9</sup> Neighbouring Turkey has prioritised the fall of Assad and defeat of Kurdish aspirations over destroying IS and has condoned the smuggling of weapons and fighters through its porous borders with Syria – a situation beneficial to IS.<sup>10</sup>

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7 For more on al-Qaeda in Syria, see: Itani, F., 'Roots and future of al-Qaeda offshoots in Syria', *Knowledge Program Civil Society in West Africa, Special Bulletin 6*, September 2014.

8 Hokayem, E., 'Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War', *Survival: global politics and strategy*, Vol. 56, No. 6, 1 December 2014.

9 Zoltan, P., 'Kuwaiti Salafism and its growing influence in the Levant', *Carnegie*, May 2014, p. 17.

10 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25274886> Also see: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/bill-park/turkey-and-islamic-state-crisis-everyone%27s-nonally>

The fall of Saddam's regime in 2003 and the Arab revolts in 2011 also had an incendiary effect on jihadism for a different reason: prisons. It is common for prisons to be breeding grounds for terrorism, especially under repressive incarceration conditions. Around 17 out of the 25 most important IS leaders spent time in US prisons between 2004 and 2011.<sup>11</sup> It was in Camp Bucca where al-Baghdadi established his authority among inmates and where jihadis and former Ba'ath officials socialised and, once out of prison, would reorganise themselves to continue the insurgency against the US. In 2013, IS was behind raids on prisons that resulted in the escape of hundreds of inmates, often senior al-Qaeda leaders.<sup>12</sup> Prisons also contributed to the emergence of IS for another reason. At the start of the Arab revolts, the Syrian regime liberated around 900 Islamists – most of whom had participated in jihad in Iraq – hoping to quell democratic opposition by confirming its narrative that it was fighting terrorists and armed groups.<sup>13</sup> Among them was Abu Mohamed al-Jolani, leader of Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN).

Finally, the main contributing factor to the rise of IS is the marginalisation of Sunna populations in Iraq under Nuri al-Maliki's reign and in Syria.<sup>14</sup> IS has formed alliances with Sunna tribes in Iraq's al-Anbar province as well as in Syria's provinces. These alliances have enabled its rise, just as in 2007 the Sunna Sahwa tribal movement defeated IS's predecessor. Today, the areas under IS control are largely tribal – areas in which the group has skilfully exploited tribal fault lines.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, IS identity is mostly Sunna and tribal, apart from its thin religious ideology.<sup>16</sup>

## Factor #2: Generational change in the global jihadi movement

Apart from contextual factors, IS is very much the product of internal generational change and competition for leadership. This cannot be understood without referring to the important changes the global jihadi movement has undergone since 2001. The creation of al-Qaeda (AQ) and shift to *global jihad* was largely a reply to the failure of local jihadi insurgencies in the 1990s and the efforts of Ben Laden to keep the movement alive by changing its direction.<sup>17</sup> By the time AQ began franchising in the mid-2000s, the multiplication of battlefields (to Iraq, Yemen, and the Maghreb/Sahel) made the already remote AQ leadership less capable of influencing these battles. Moreover, fragmentation of these jihadi groups often put a further burden on AQ Core, with groups taking control of territories and engaging in hostilities against near enemies rather than confining their activities to AQ's traditional modes of operation. With the leadership in Pakistan, this made these local jihadis' affiliation to AQ more symbolic than literal, lacking a unified interpretation of jihad.

11 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/-sp-isis-the-inside-story>

12 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/23/us-iraq-violence-alqaeda-idUSBRE96M0C720130723>

13 <http://www.dostor.org/629971> , Also see: Itani, Fidaa, 'Roots and futures of al-Qaeda offshoots in Syria', HIVOS Bulletin, 6 September 2014.

14 See: Wicken, S., 'Iraq's Sunnis in Crisis', *Middle East Report II*, Institute for the Study of War, May 2013.

15 Having operated for around ten years among tribes, IS has mastered to a large degree the game of dancing around tribal fault lines. See: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/26/isis-exploits-tribal-fault-lines-to-control-its-territory-jihadi>

16 Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, M., *ISIS and the deceptive rebooting of al-Qaeda*, Policy Paper 2014/5, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, August 2014.

17 Gerges, F., *The rise and fall of al-Qaeda*, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 76.

Partially in consequence of looser control, the past decade has marked the rise of a ‘second generation’ of jihadis who mostly share a common experience of battle in Iraq. Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi epitomised this new generation, becoming the leader of jihad in Iraq. As early as 1996, he was granted financial support from al-Qaeda to start his training camp in Herat. Following his release from prison in Jordan in 1996, al-Zarqawi returned to Afghanistan where he first met with Ben Laden in 1999.<sup>18</sup> Upon his return to Jordan, al-Zarqawi founded the ‘Jama’at Al-Tawhid Wa Al-Jihad’ (1999), with the goal of toppling of the Jordanian monarchy (see Table 1 for a chronological overview of the names of the Islamic State). However, al-Zarqawi’s extreme *takfir*<sup>19</sup> opinions created tensions between the two. With the fall of the Ba’ath regime in 2003, al-Zarqawi was one of the first to gain prestige among foreign fighters for his excessive violence and extreme targeting of Shia. This made him successful among foreign fighters, who all wanted to join his regiment, but much less so among local Muslim populations. With more foreign fighters joining, al-Zarqawi was in need of financial resources, while his success gave Ben Laden the impetus to appropriate jihad in Iraq. After eight months of negotiations in which al-Zarqawi stated a number of conditions in order to give his *bay’at*, ‘al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers’ (October 2004) was created.<sup>20</sup>

Among al-Zarqawi’s main conditions was a plan to combat the Shia and provoke a sectarian war.<sup>21</sup> Al-Qaeda never accepted the idea of a fully fledged war against the Shia, but the agreement was nevertheless concluded. However, al-Zarqawi’s organisation continued to operate separately from al-Qaeda, and its brutal tactics provoked a rift with the al-Qaeda leadership. Al-Zarqawi publicised his atrocities through the media, claiming responsibility for bombings and justifying the targeting of anyone who was part of the new Iraqi regime and the indiscriminate killing of Shias. He popularised the practice of decapitations of foreigners, dressed in the orange Guantanamo jumpsuit, a practice which is denounced by al-Qaeda and for which IS is known today.

**Table 1. History of names of the Islamic State**

GROUP NAME	YEARS
Jama’at al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad	1999-2004
al-Qaeda in Iraq (al-Qaeda in the Land of the two River)	2004-2006
Majlis al-Shura al-Mujahedeen	2006
Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)	2006-2013
Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)	2013-2014
Islamic State (IS)	July 2014 - present

18 On the life of al-Zarqawi, see: Milelli, J.P., ‘Abou Moussab al-Zarqawi, le jihad en Mesopotamie’, in *al-Qaeda dans le texte*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2005, p. 367-415.

19 ‘*Takfir*’ refers to the practice of excommunicating someone from the community of Muslims.

20 See al-Zarqawi’s letter to Ben Laden and al-Zawahiri. He says he will only pledge allegiance if they accept his visions of the importance of the ‘near enemy’ and the need to create sectarian war between Muslims. See: *al-Qaeda dans le texte*, pp. 382-415.

21 The Shia, according to al-Zarqawi, were ‘even more dangerous’ than the danger stemming from the US.

Al-Zarqawi's atrocities and focus on the purging of the Muslim Umma *from within* contrasted with al-Qaeda's leadership, which identified 'apostate' institutions and power holders as key challenges, not Muslim populations.<sup>22</sup> In 2005, these divergences came to the fore with the release of a letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi. In his letter, al-Zawahiri, insists on the importance of support from the Muslim Umma.<sup>23</sup> The killing of Shias as well as the slaughtering of captives, he said, had raised sharp criticism in the Muslim community.<sup>24</sup> Al-Zarqawi's former mentor, Abu Mohamed al-Maqdisi, had expressed, as early as 2004, his worries about al-Zarqawi's tactics in his text '*al-Zarqawi: munasara wa munasaha*' (*al-Zarqawi: help and advice*).

While ignoring criticism of his conduct in war, al-Zarqawi did respond to al-Zawahiri's calls for institution-building by creating in early 2006 the 'Majlis al-Shura al-Mujahedeen' with al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) at its top. This Council was an umbrella coalition that aimed to seize political authority in Iraq should the US withdraw. The process was further consolidated after al-Zarqawi's death, with the announcement, in October 2006, of the 'Islamic State of Iraq' (ISI) and the appointment of its new leader, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. An important change following al-Zarqawi's death was that the *bay'at* to Ben Laden was never renewed by AQI and on paper invalidated its subordinate role in relation to al-Qaeda.

In April 2013, overt enmity broke out when ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced that he would extend the group to Syria and change its name to the 'Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham' (ISIS). The start of the uprising in Syria provided an opportunity *par excellence* for ISI to come back, not in the least because Syria is considered by apocalyptic jihadi to be the place where the final battles of good against evil will be fought, as recorded in different sayings from the Prophet Muhammed.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, al-Baghdadi, as well as al-Zawahiri, focused on Syria and sent a number of emissaries to Syria to set up a new jihadi organisation there. Among the emissaries was al-Jolani, who, after his release from Syrian prison, participated in jihad in Iraq and now was sent to Syria by al-Baghdadi to create a local ISI branch. But the success of al-Jolani and his largely Syrian fighter regiment, leading to the proclamation of Jabhat al-Nusra in November 2012, caused tensions with ISI. To re-establish its grip, al-Baghdadi publicly proclaimed in a message in August 2013 that al-Nusra was part of ISI and announced the merger of the two into ISIS. Al-Jolani, having established a power position, defied al-Baghdadi and reacted by denying that information, pledging his allegiance instead to al-Zawahiri, who had succeeded Ben Laden in 2011.<sup>26</sup>

In February 2014, the situation became more tense due to growing criticism from mainstream Syrian rebels over the extreme *takfiri* tactics of ISIS and its unwillingness to cooperate with other forces and engage in reconciliation, with ISI criticising them for cooperating with

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22 Fishman, B., *Redefining the Islamic State: the rise and fall of al-Qaeda in Iraq*, National Securities Studies Policy Program, New America Foundation, August 2011.

23 For the letter: <http://fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/dni101105.html>

24 The differences between al-Zawahiri and al-Zarqawi could be considered as those between a 'strategist' (al-Zawahiri) and a 'doctrinary' (al-Zarqawi). Al-Zawahiri saw in 2005 the conditions for an Islamic State approaching, and called upon al-Zarqawi to establish an inclusive coalition based on the principles of Islamic consultation, while stopping the indiscriminate killings.

25 Many of them refer to a historical battle between two Muslim armies near Damascus and in the small village of Dabiq in northern Syria, which not surprisingly has been chosen as the title of IS propaganda magazine.

26 By then, al-Nusra had become popular in Syria as one of the strongest opposition movements, counting on local support, due to its successful fighters, provision of services, and anti-corruption measures.

'unbelievers' or 'apostates'.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, al-Qaeda's efforts to mediate between al-Nusra and ISIS failed dramatically, with the killing of the AQ-designated mediator Abu Khalid al-Suri in a suicide attack that al-Qaeda and al-Nusra attributed to ISIS. The incident triggered a series of violent clashes between the two entities in Syria.

In September 2013, in response to the excesses of jihadi violence and infighting, al-Qaeda's al-Zawahiri issued a manual of guidelines for the work of a jihadi.<sup>28</sup> The manual codifies rules of engagement for AQ branches and highlights concerns over IS methods, clearly reflecting the differences between two generations of jihadis. Drafted after the rise of IS, it pleads for moderation, calling on groups to protect civilians and avoid attacks against members of deviant Muslim 'sects'. In February 2014, al-Qaeda officially distanced itself from ISIS. Al-Zawahiri had wanted al-Baghdadi to confine his operations to Iraq, while attributing the jihad in al-Sham to JaN.<sup>29</sup>

For its part, IS claims to be the true heir of Ben Laden's al-Qaeda, in the form of the Caliphate. It has severely criticised al-Zawahiri for having deviated from what it considers the right direction in jihad, by softening its stance towards the 'apostate' rulers, the Muslim Brothers and the general Muslim masses.<sup>30</sup> This should be placed in the context of the leadership void that emerged after Ben Laden's death and the sweeping changes within the region in 2011 with the start of Arab popular revolts. These revolts and the democratic election of a Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, in which even Salafis participated, was a model of peaceful democratic change in the name of Islam that presented a major challenge to AQ and the global jihadi movement. Al-Zawahiri finally decided to support the revolutions in principle.<sup>31</sup> This revision of its earlier positions vis-à-vis democratic change and the Muslim Brothers was condemned by IS, who criticised it for '*endorsing the tyrant*' (referring to Morsi). Consequently, IS leaders and supporters refer to al-Qaeda as '*murji*'<sup>32</sup> and '*Sarurists*', a derogatory name within jihadi circles referring to the movement of Muhammed Surur, whose ideology was inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB).

In summary, while having the same guiding principles of Salafi jihadism, AQ and IS differ in questions of interpretation related to authority (i.e. conditions for establishing the Caliphate), and classification of the enemy. There is, in addition, the more 'mundane' matter of competition between the two for leadership of the global jihadi movement following Ben Laden's death.

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27 See: Zelin, A., 'Inside baseball on Syrian rebel infighting', *War on the Rocks Journal*, 7 February 2014.

28 Shaikh Ayman al-Zawahiri, *General Guidelines for Jihad*, As-Sahab Media, 2013, <https://archive.org/stream/JihadGuidelines/guidelines#page/n0/mode/2up>

29 In current splits with the leadership as well as with other al-Qaeda branches, the latter does not blame IS for establishing an Islamic State in Iraq, but rather for transcending Iraqi borders and claiming to represent the Muslim Umma.

30 Sheikh Abi Mohammad al-Adnani, 'This is not our methodology, nor will it ever be', al-Furqan Media, April 2014. <https://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2014/04/18/message-by-isis-shaykh-abu-muhammad-al-adnani-as-shami/>

31 <http://digital.ahram.org.eg/articles.aspx?Serial=643521&eid=6738> (Mohammed Aburumman, 'al-Qaeda's Ideology and Coping with Arab Revolts', July 2011)

32 Those who believe Muslims cannot be excommunicated, even if they commit sins.

## The Islamic State: doctrinal differences with al-Qaeda

While completely disregarding thirteen centuries of intellectual tradition (by picking arbitrarily Qur'anic verses and *ahadith* to justify its actions), and lacking support from vast majority of Muslims and scholars,<sup>33</sup> IS nonetheless has a particular doctrine. Leaving aside the question as to the place of IS within debates on Islamic jurisprudence, the group's communications give insights into its doctrine pertaining to issues such as conduct of war, classification of the enemy, interpretation of *takfir*, treatment of prisoners and dealing with the wider Muslim community. In this, it has some major disagreements with AQ Core.

The generational divide that characterises the competition between AQ and IS is also reproduced in the religious authority structure of each group. One of the most prominent muftis of IS (which has three main muftis)<sup>34</sup> is, Turki Ben Ali – a 30-year-old Bahraini and former pupil of jihadi ideologue Abu Mohamed al-Maqdisi. Ben Ali has become the ideological heavyweight for IS and is the closest IS has to a religious authority. He defies the customs of seniority (*asbaqiyya*) of Muslim clerics and lacks the support of mainstream jihadi authorities. Following IS's refusal to accept mediation from al-Maqdisi in the conflict with JaN in Syria, Ben Ali has fallen out of grace with al-Maqdisi, with the latter denouncing the group as deviating from divine truth and disrespecting the commands of senior scholars and leadership, referring to AQ. In similarly strong words, Ben Ali replied to al-Maqdisi, "*my former sheikh*" (*shaykh 'l-asbaq*), refuting the idea of seniority and defending young jihadis who are willing to break away from the patronage of their elders.<sup>35</sup>

Warfare is a complex issue within Islamic law, which has elaborated a body of jurisprudence on warfare guided by two main principles: protection of non-combatants, and the limitation and restriction of war. For IS, however, violence and extreme brutality are the norm, justified not only by classifying groups as enemies and unbelievers, but also as part of its apocalyptic world vision,<sup>36</sup> which requires violence as part of the 'battle of all battles' precipitating the doomsday scenario. A *hadith* prophesies that doomsday will be a battle between two armies – the Roman army against the army of the Muslims – in Dabiq (Syria).<sup>37</sup> In IS communications, the US and its allies are referred to as the Romans. IS wants to provoke US involvement on the ground to precipitate the 'final battle'.

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33 IS jurisprudence and reasoning is alien to the 13 centuries of scholarly debate and textual context that forms the belief and practices of the vast majority of Muslims, giving the organisation a very thin religious base. See: <http://goo.gl/PzRx1b> Regarding the rejection of the IS by scholars, see the list compiled by Hanif Hassan, M., 'Muslim voices against IS/ISIS/ISIL', <http://haniff.sg/en/jihad-terror-en/muslim-voices-against-is-isis-isis/>. Also see: <http://www.clingendael.nl/publication/do-it-yourself-islam-views-religious-credibility-islamic-state?lang=nl>.

34 IS has three main Shariah leaders: Omar al-Qahtani, a Saudi national, Turki Ben Ali, a Bahraini national, and Osman al-Nazeh al-Asiri, a Saudi national. Despite its importance, the body has received limited coverage and is surrounded by secrets. Al-Baghdadi reportedly heads this six-member council personally, emulating the six-party shura body established by the early Muslim Caliph Omar Ibn al-Khattab. Among its duties is monitoring the adherence of other councils to 'Sharia provisions', and choosing a 'Caliph' in the event of the current Caliph's death. See: <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/20599>

35 <http://www.jihadica.com/the-caliphate%E2%80%99s-scholar-in-arms/>

36 For more information on apocalyptic thought and jihadi movements, see: Filiu, J.P., *L'apocalypse dans l'Islam*, 2008.

37 The enslavement of Yazidi women was justified by IS not only because they are 'original unbelievers' but also because the return of slavery would be a sign of the end of days approaching.

The use of extreme violence and *takfiri* principles is not only the legacy of al-Zarqawi's practices in Iraq, but can also be found in the work of Abu Bakr Naji. In his book *The management of savagery* (2004), Naji calls for the creation of 'pockets of instability' and 'regions of savagery' where individuals, in their need for stabilising factors, resort to jihadi groups; this is part of the process of creating the Caliphate.<sup>38</sup> The book calls for unrestricted, random and terrifying violence that has found resonance among what is IS today.<sup>39</sup> On the ground, this reverberates through IS's indiscriminate killings and its calls to attack by any means citizens of countries participating in the international coalition arrayed against it.<sup>40</sup>

IS has released documents setting out its doctrine in more detail. As early as 2005, in its earlier incarnation in Iraq as ISI, it published a manifesto entitled *This is our creed, this is our direction*.<sup>41</sup> The most important elements of the doctrine are the focus on the 'near enemy' and the need to purge the Muslim community from the inside, resonating with al-Zarqawi's legacy. According to IS classification, there are the people of the book, the apostates and the original unbelievers. The purging of the Muslim community from within means, in IS's view, that the battle against the Shia and the apostates should be prioritised. In al-Zarqawi's writings, the near enemy is not the tyrannical regime, as is common in jihadi literature, but rather the Shia. Even more than the US, Shia are considered enemies in the eyes of the Umma. Provoking sectarian war was considered as a means to spur violent counter-reactions by the Shia against the Sunna, thus strengthening the latter's support for the jihadi project.

While the near enemy is still prioritised on the ground, IS has, since September, placed more emphasis on attacking the West and 'apostate' regimes. This complements its more direct objective of expanding its control over territory and support for the Caliphate. It is also a response to the international coalition that is battling against the IS and the participation of Arab countries in its airstrikes. It could be seen as a tactical move to deflect attention from the warfare in Iraq/Syria and IS's governance failure.<sup>42</sup>

In terms of *takfir*, it is important to understand that IS applies a very limited interpretation of the concept and *de facto* considers everyone who does not accept the Caliphate as being part of the 'apostate' or 'unbelievers' group. Upon its creation, IS proclaimed that Muslims all over the world had an obligation to emigrate from the lands of unbelief to the land of Islam and to pledge allegiance to the Caliph Ibrahim. For those who are considered 'people of the book', IS has imposed them upon them the 'protection' (*dhimni*) pact, as long as they pay the poll tax (*jizya*) and abide by a set of other strict regulations. In practice, however, this pact was imposed with the 'threat of nothing but the sword', and in Mosul most Christian and Shia residents simply fled.

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38 In 2014, Jack Jones alerted the world's attention to the existence of the book and its inspiration for IS. The book was translated in 2006. <http://thinkprogress.org/world/2014/09/10/3565635/the-book-that-really-explains-isis-hint-its-not-the-quran/>

39 On the ground, this reverberates through IS's indiscriminate killings and its calls to attack, by any means, citizens of countries participating in the international coalition. See: <http://goo.gl/PzRx1b>

40 For example, IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani issued the statement 'Soldiers of the Islamic State' on 21 September 2014, calling for IS sympathizers and/or members to attack citizens of members of the international anti-IS coalition, irrespective of their status as civilian, soldier or official.

41 '*Hadhihi Aqeedatuna wa hadha manhajuna*' ('This is our creed and this is our direction'), Maktabat al-Hammam (al-Hammam Library), Printing of the Islamic State, 2005.

42 Airstrikes have weakened the group's capacity to provide services. Mosul's electrical plants are at an all-time low and the price of gasoline products has greatly increased since September. <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2015/03/03/258428/as-airstrikes-damage-islamic-state.html>

**Table 2. Differences between al-Qaeda and IS on *takfir*, the Caliphate, treatment of the enemy and jihad**

Issue	al-Qaeda	Islamic State
<b>Takfir</b>	AQ accuses IS of extremes in excommunication members of the Sunna Muslim community and the incompetence of its young 'Shariah scholars' (it questions its religious legitimacy).	IS accuses the AQ of al-Zawahiri to have deviated from the AQ of Ben Laden. It criticises its 'soft' stances and endorsement of democracy in the case of the MB.
	AQ is more flexible in distinguishing between infidelity in deed and infidelity of the person. It has endorsed the revolutions in case of Islamic political parties (MB). Moreover, AQ affiliates have been more open in working together with other parties on the ground (see al-Nusra).	IS has a very narrow interpretation of <i>takfir</i> and has basically excommunicated all those who do not accept its Caliphate and has been extreme in its attack of Sunnis cooperating with 'apostate' rulers or unbelievers. It does not accept competition or cooperation.
<b>Caliphate</b>	AQ accuses IS of imposing the Caliphate upon Muslims while the conditions have not been met yet; thus declaring the Caliphate void.	IS and its scholars (such as Turki Ben Ali) believe that the Caliphate is a necessary step to unify the Umma, rather than dividing it and believes the credentials of al-Baghdadi (tribe of Quraysh) makes him a legitimate Caliph.
<b>Treatment of the enemy</b>	AQ has criticised IS for its media publicity of decapitations of prisoners and foreigners and urges to kidnap in exchange of prisoners (AQ-affiliates have killed hostages by bullets).	IS has a history of decapitations by knife, a practice introduced by al-Zarqawi. It justifies its killings of foreigners for being agents of the West, even aid workers granted 'protection' in Muslim lands.
<b>Jihad</b>	AQ has emphasised the attack against the 'far enemy' and the use of economic warfare to neutralise the enemy (and particularly Arab apostate rulers).	IS has emphasised the attack against the near enemy – mainly the Shia and apostate. However, since the start of the coalition strikes, IS has called upon Muslims to strike the US and its allies by any possible means.
	AQ has become more conscious of the violence of jihadis and in its <i>General Guidelines for Jihad</i> (2013) has called for moderation, the protection of civilians and avoid the indiscriminate attacks against deviant sects.	IS, supported by the younger generation of Salafi-jihadis, does not differentiate between civilians and combatants.

## 2. Expansion of the Islamic State in the Middle East and North Africa

### The experience of al-Qaeda expansion

Jihadi expert Aaron Zelin was the first to analyse the IS model of expansionism. Writing on the Monkey Cage blog for *The Washington Post*,<sup>43</sup> Zelin notes that these IS expansions remind us of AQ's announcements of franchises in the mid-2000s. At that time, AQ's newly created franchises – al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al-Shahab – gave the organisation a far stretch across the Middle East and North Africa. However, far from boosting the power of the mother organisation, these franchises often became a burden. This theory was put forward by Daniel Byman, as Zelin notes. Byman demonstrated how “preference divergence”<sup>44</sup> and “al-Qaeda’s difficulty in ensuring command and control” created a number of problems in terms of delegation and integration, concluding that the franchises represented a net loss for AQ Core.<sup>45</sup>

One major reason for the preference divergence between AQ and its franchises related to the opportunity costs for these local jihadi movements to incorporate the goals of AQ and switch the focus from local struggles to the ‘far enemy’.<sup>46</sup> With more resources devoted to the global struggle, fewer could be devoted to local struggles, which often reduced groups’ local legitimacy. As Thomas Hegghamer demonstrates, the AQAP was hurt when its clerics and leadership started to prioritise the fight against US forces in Iraq rather than the fight against Saudi rulers, thus costing the organisation legitimacy and money.<sup>47</sup> Another example is the case of AQIM, which, while increasing its focus on Western targets since its allegiance to al-Qaeda (2007), has not been able to mobilise many supporters in Europe for global jihad.<sup>48</sup>

A second problem was its difficulty in controlling and commanding its franchises. Having the brand name meant these groups could damage AQ’s brand. Extreme *takfiri* strategies employed by groups such as AQI under al-Zarqawi hurt AQ’s reputation. Infighting and fragmentation also posed problems for AQ Core. Also, geographical distance from affiliates, combined with strong security crackdowns on jihadi activism following 9/11, made communication particularly costly and dangerous.<sup>49</sup> To create alliances, AQ Core sends emissaries and engages in long-distance communication, which is vulnerable to

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43 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/01/28/the-islamic-states-model/>

44 By preference divergence, Byman means the divergence in preferences of the local groups affiliating themselves to AQ and the preferences of AQ Core.

45 Byman, D., ‘Buddies or burdens: understanding the al-Qaeda relationship with its affiliate organizations’, *Security Studies*, 2014, 23:3, 431-470.

46 Ibid, p. 27.

47 Hegghamer, T., ‘The failure of jihad in Saudi Arabia’, *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, 10 February 2010.

48 While focusing its rhetoric on France and the United States, AQIM’s actions still centre around regional targets, with local agendas being prioritised over the agenda of AQ Core. See Jean-Pierre Filiu, ‘al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: A Case Study in the Opportunism of Global Jihad’, *CTC Sentinel* 3 (April 2010): 14.

49 Byman, op cit., p. 31.

interception.<sup>50</sup> Finally, the war on terror has had an impact on the availability of resources for the organisation, as growing US and allied pressure has reduced the organisation's ability to dispense largesse, making franchises more reliant on their own fundraising efforts, thus changing the nature of cooperation with the mother organisation.<sup>51</sup>

## The alternative model of IS expansion

Related to these observations are the questions of whether IS, following in AQ footsteps by creating local branches, will face a similar scenario and whether the IS model resembles AQ's or differs from it in terms of ambitions and modes of expansion.

Without going into details at this point, it is important to note that, looking at IS doctrine and strategy, one can observe differences likely to affect the IS model of expansion. One of these differences is the focus on the 'far' versus the 'near' enemy. AQ's main interest in creating franchises was to have those local branches stage attacks against Western targets within the apostate Arab regimes, so as to weaken Western support for these countries and dry them up financially, thus facilitating a takeover by AQ.<sup>52</sup>

As noted by Zelin, IS has a different strategy.<sup>53</sup> While claiming to aspire to global jihad, it has been very localised in its actions, focusing on territorial gains and limited governance, according to its strategy to maintain and expand. Consequently, it has been more pragmatic and flexible. It is able to adapt to different contexts, facilitated by its thin ideology and not constrained by a very clearly defined goal of attacking a far enemy, as was the case for AQ. IS ideology is, moreover, secondary to its identity, which is mostly Sunna and tribal, having relied upon a mix of force, clientelism and manipulation of local rivalries to assert its power in territories.<sup>54</sup> While IS central command is predominantly Iraqi, it relies upon local social structures to rule. In this regard, IS uses local people as second-tier commanders who know the area well and have social power within communities. This strategy allows locals to govern their own affairs, in a low-level governance and policing role, while reducing the visibility of IS, as analyst Hassan Hassan notes.<sup>55</sup> This strategy allowed IS to take swift control of towns in Deir Ezzor, where mostly young tribal leaders were co-opted (i.e. through oil deals), as they had local credibility because of their role in fighting the Assad regime. Meanwhile, IS ensured that external parties did not succeed in co-opting these tribes, by attending tribal meetings that were organised and funded by Gulf countries.

In sum, one could argue that the IS model is less in contradiction with the local agendas of jihadi groups, thus limiting the risks of divergence of interests between local and core organisations. Also, compared to AQ, IS has been a master in the use of highly professional

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50 An example is the case of Ben Laden's emissary who was sent to Algeria to reach out to AQIM's predecessor (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat – GSPC) in 2002, but was intercepted and killed by Algerian security forces.

51 Greg Bruno, 'al-Qaeda's Financial Pressures', Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 1 February 2010.

52 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/01/28/the-islamic-states-model/>

53 Ibidem.

54 Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, M., *ISIS and the deceptive rebooting of al-Qaeda*, Policy Paper 2014/5, GCSP, August 2015, p. 4.

55 For more on these strategies by IS on co-opting local forces in Syria, see: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/26/isis-exploits-tribal-fault-lines-to-control-its-territory-jihadi> and <http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2014/10/6299/hassan-hassan-uproot-isis-deir-ezzor/>.

propaganda to directly communicate its battles on the ground and to gain recruits within jihadi circles.

## Sinai and Libya: case studies of Islamic State expansion

This part of the report seeks to shed light on the rationale behind the IS model of expansion by focusing on two case studies: the Sinai province and the provinces in Libya. These are the two areas where IS outreach is strongest, although its presence and control in these areas should not be overstated. With weak state control, marginalised tribal populations, histories of jihadi activism, and porous borders, both of these IS wilayat seem to have a relatively strong impact on changing local dynamics. Both have adopted similar tactics as IS on the ground and used the same media strategy that IS has used in Iraq and Syria.<sup>56</sup> Also, since their announcement in November, both groups have stepped up their actions and present a new challenge to already fragile and marginalised political contexts. The tribal nature of both societies, moreover, gives IS the opportunity to replicate its experience in operating in tribal territory and exploit tribal rivalries to extend its reach.

Before analysing Sinai and Libya, it is important to briefly take a look at IS 'declared' provinces in Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. So far, there has not been much activity from these provinces. In Algeria, the group Jund al-Khilafah was proclaimed in September, as a former faction of AQIM. A few days later (24 September) it beheaded the French citizen Herve Gourdel – responding to the call by IS to attack citizens of the coalition partners. In December, its leader, Abdelmalik Gouri, was killed by Algerian security forces and so far there have not been any activities reported by the group. Assessed on the basis of its activities to date, the group seems rather insignificant.

In Yemen and Saudi Arabia, no formal activities have been carried out in the name of IS. Moreover, the 'groups of mujahedeen' in both countries that reportedly have pledged allegiance to IS as a new province have remained undefined. In Saudi Arabia, the government has pointed to IS cells in the country and their responsibility for certain small-scale attacks, but IS growth is difficult to achieve given the tight security restrictions imposed by the regime.<sup>57</sup> In Yemen, the strong influence of AQAP as a powerful branch of AQ Core has been a barrier to IS expansion into that country. While individual middle-ranking officers have reportedly joined IS, AQAP leadership has been firm in rejecting the Caliphate and in reconfirming its allegiance to AQ Core. Following the IS expansion speech in November, AQAP was quick to reply in a video message from its leader criticising the new provinces for creating *fitna* and rejecting the Caliphate.<sup>58</sup> *Houthi* expansionism has given more popular

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56 Ibidem.

57 On 1 December, the pro-IS al-Battar Media Foundation released a video stating that "Supporters of the IS in the land of the two holy mosques" allegedly shot Danish citizen Thomas Hoepner from a car. Earlier, in May, the Saudi government pointed to the presence of IS cells. However, one should note that the campaign against IS has also been used by the government to crack down on peaceful dissent under the banner of anti-terror legislation.

58 On 21 November, AQAP released a video by its leader al-Nadhari, refusing for the first time publicly the IS Caliphate while referring to IS as an Islamic State and al-Baghdadi as a great sheikh. However, the video criticises the extension of IS to new provinces, saying that this would split the ranks of the mujahedeen. <http://goo.gl/KFe3fQ>.

support to AQAP, which is already well engrained in the local tribal context.<sup>59</sup> AQAP's solidarity statement for IS and its recognition of IS as an Islamic State should be read as a document to prevent *fitna*, while competition characterises relationships between the two, with IS becoming increasingly hostile to AQAP.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, Libya and the Sinai seem the most promising for IS expansion and will be examined in greater detail in the next two sections. Table 3 below summarises the main provinces that IS has established to date.

**Table 3. IS proclaimed provinces**

IS-declared provinces	Main groups involved
Wilayat al-Jaza'ir	<b>Jund al-Khilafah</b> (offshoot of AQIM in Algeria)
Wilayat Sinai	<b>ABM</b> (merger of <i>al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad</i> and Palestinian jihadi groups)
Wilayat al-Barqah/Tarabulus/Fezzan	<b>Shura Council of Islamic Youth/al-Battar brigade</b>
Wilayat al-Haramayn	'Mujahedeen Saudi Arabia' (unknown, no major activities)
Wilayat al-Yemen	'Mujahedeen Yemen' (unknown, no major activities)
Wilayat Khorasan	<b>Afghan and Pakistan Taliban</b> (defections of middle-ranking officers)

59 <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/03/some-evidence-for-the-islamic-state-presence-in-1> al-Tamimi refers to certain documents allegedly published by IS in Yemen, but also concludes that AQAP is a strong hindrance to IS expansionism in Yemen.

60 <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2014/10/al-qaida-in-the-arabian-peninsula-statement> With the statement, AQAP has tried to stay out of the conflict between IS and al-Nusra and called several times for the prevention of internal strife among mujahedeen. Following its rejection of the Caliphate, however, IS has become increasingly hostile to the group.

### 3. The case of Wilayat Sinai (Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis)

On 10 November 2014, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) pledged its allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in an audio message posted on its Twitter account. The *bay'at* was made by an unidentified spokesman, characteristic of the group's opaqueness.<sup>61</sup> The announcement followed a period of twists-and-turns in which the group expressed its sympathy for IS without pledging allegiance. Weeks earlier, the group had posted videos of beheadings of people it said were spying on it from Israel – a tactic similar to that used by IS. Moreover, since the summer of 2014, a general trend among jihadis in the Sinai/Gaza region indicates sympathy from various groups for the Caliphate.<sup>62</sup> As the expert al-Tamimi recalls, IS demands vis-à-vis recognition are inherently absolutist, making groups that maintain a position 'in between' lose their ideological credibility, as the Caliphate demands recognition of the Caliph as 'Emir of all Muslims'.<sup>63</sup> Soon after al-Baghdadi's speech recognising the pledge, ABM changed its name and its Twitter account into 'Wilayat Sinai'. Meanwhile, it announced a new media arm, 'Saleel al-Sawarim', branded as the official media arm of IS in Egypt.

#### What is Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis?

Little is known about ABM, its leadership, membership, origins or financing structure.<sup>64</sup> This is largely due to security restrictions imposed by the Egyptian government in the Sinai, as well as the usual secrecy precautions that jihadi groups take to protect themselves. What is known is that the group came to the fore after the 25 January 2011 revolution in Egypt, profiting from the chaos and security void following the toppling of Mubarak's regime. Some of its members are jihadi escapees from prison, some were released after Mubarak's ouster and later joined by foreign fighters infiltrating Egypt from fragile states harbouring jihadi networks, such as Libya, Yemen and Mali.<sup>65</sup> Weakened control over Egypt's borders with Libya and Gaza during the revolution allowed the group to obtain refuge and supplies from sympathetic militants on both sides of the country.

The roots of ABM go deeper and predate the fall of Morsi's regime. In fact, jihadi activism has been on a rise in the Sinai since the early 2000s, reinforced by the often disproportionate action taken by Egyptian security forces to quell terrorism in North Sinai. Coupled with decades-old grievances of the tribal populations of this marginalised region – excluded from development projects – these factors have contributed to the rise of jihadism in the Sinai. Relations between the Egyptian state and the jihadis deteriorated steeply following the government's handling of the Taba and Nuwaiba bombings in October 2004 in particular, which included a brutal crackdown and arrests of thousands of people (including women and

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61 <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2014/11/analysis-jamaat-ansar-bayt-al-maqdis-allegiance>

62 <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/bayah-baghdadi-foreign-support-islamic-state-part-2/>

63 Al-Baghdadi, as Caliph, claims to be vice-regent of Muhammad, leading the Muslim Nation, and the supreme military commander.

64 <http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/backgrounder/what-ansar-beit-al-maqdis>

65 <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142423/khalil-al-anani/isis-enters-egypt>

children).<sup>66</sup> The following year, there was a series of bombings in Sharm al-Sheikh. This time a group claimed responsibility: 'al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad' (TSJ). Its founder, Khaled Musa'id,<sup>67</sup> a dentist from the powerful al-Swaraka tribe, was instrumental in turning the group from an ideological current into an organisational structure with a hierarchy and multiple cells in North Sinai, drawing direct inspiration from al-Zarqawi's operations in Iraq. The events were followed by another series of crackdowns on its members and often on their relatives and neighbours. It was in prison – a common venue for jihadi socialisation – where this loose group of Sinai jihadis split into different factions and bonded into new networks, some opting for *da'wa* activities and others continuing militant jihad.

According to local sources, it was in 2011 that a group of Palestinian jihadis joined the TSJ and together formed the ABM.<sup>68</sup> The Emir of TSJ was Palestinian jihadi Hasham al-Saedni, a terrorist who had fought with al-Qaeda in Iraq. Moreover, the creation of TSJ was directly inspired by al-Zarqawi's organisation in Iraq, demonstrating an ideological affinity with IS. The group reportedly shared membership with the Majlis Shura al-Mujahedeen fi Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis, a Gaza-based jihadi group.<sup>69</sup> To date, ABM is the largest operating jihadi group in the Sinai. It has reportedly been capable of uniting under its guidance a range of smaller jihadi groups.<sup>70</sup>

## Ties with international jihadi networks, al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and its predecessors

Ties with international jihadi networks have strengthened in the Sinai from the early 2000s onwards. Several factors have enhanced the attractiveness of the region as a suitable environment for international jihadism. These include weak security control of the border region, difficulties in policing the area, and the longstanding marginalisation of its tribal inhabitants by the state. The fall of Mubarak's regime in 2011 created additional chaos and also saw the release and escape of hundreds of jihadis from Egyptian prisons.<sup>71</sup> Added to this, is the strategic importance of the Sinai because of its borders with Israel. AQ already viewed the Sinai as a base of operations for fighting the 'Zionist-Crusader' enemies and various links with AQ were established, with evidence of AQAP operating in the Sinai and the presence of a number of AQ figures.

In late 2013, al-Zawahiri reportedly joined a conference call of more than 20 AQ operatives, including aspiring AQ branches operating in the Sinai.<sup>72</sup> While no official affiliation was reported, ABM seemed to have ties to the AQ networks and displayed sympathy for its leadership in official statements. Al-Zawahiri himself praised the group. Yet in November 2013 the group clearly chose IS, incarnating the new generation of jihadis. Several factors explain this choice.

66 Ashour, O., 'Jihadists and post-Jihadists in the Sinai', *Opinion*, Brookings Institution, 5 September 2012.

67 He was killed on 28 September 2005 in a fire fight with the Central Security Forces.

68 [http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middleeast/2014/01/140123\\_ansar\\_maqdes\\_background](http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middleeast/2014/01/140123_ansar_maqdes_background)

69 Joscelyn, T., *Al-Qaeda's expansion in Egypt: Implications for US Homeland Security*, Hearing before the House Committee on Homeland Security, Washington DC, 11 February 2014.

70 I.e. 'Jama'at al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad', 'Shuhada al-Saghra' and 'Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis' (Majlis al-Shura al-Mujahedeen), based in Gaza.

71 Some reports even refer to the release of thousands of prisoners in 2011. See: 'Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis Oath of allegiance to the Islamic State', *Wikistrat*, February 2015, p. 4.

72 Joscelyn, T., op. cit., p. 10.

First, as a result of the unfolding of the Syrian crisis and crackdown of Islamists in Egypt, hundreds of Egyptians participated in jihad in Syria and where thus exposed to IS ideology and practice. According to some estimates, IS currently has around 5,000 Egyptian fighters.<sup>73</sup> Second, the 2012 Libya crisis opened up doors for the smuggling of weapons and fighters to and from groups in the Sinai, allowing for cooperation between jihadi groups on both sides of the border and for the build-up of a weapons arsenal. Reportedly, the Sinai province would send fighters to Libya to train with the IS branch there.<sup>74</sup> Third, and more importantly, socialisation between ABM fighters among IS's predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq, played a significant role. As we have seen, TSI was heavily inspired by al-Zarqawi's methods. Other groups in the Sinai, such as the Abdullah Azzam Brigades (AAB), also had close relations with al-Zarqawi and as early as 2004 reportedly carried out attacks in the Sinai on the instructions of al-Zarqawi.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the deputy chief and military commander of ISI until 2010 was the Egyptian Abu Ayub al-Masri, a student and member of al-Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad in the 1990s who would later become one of al-Zarqawi's top officers.<sup>76</sup> Other top-level leaders and ABM founders, for example Tawfiq Mohamad Faraj (Abu Abdullah), were also veterans of jihad in Iraq.<sup>77</sup>

Another partial explanation for ABM's allegiance to IS is the gradual shift in its targets since the fall of Morsi's MB government. Since 2013, apart from its usual targeting of Israeli interests, such as gas pipelines, the group has expanded its attacks to the 'near enemy', the Egyptian 'apostate' army and its interests (declaring the regime to be a "*group of people that fight Allah and the Muslims*").<sup>78</sup> This shift is undoubtedly reinforced by the Egyptian regime's heavy crackdown on terrorists and anti-terror campaigns, such as its recent decision to create a buffer zone near the border with Gaza, demolishing the homes of residents in Rafah. Despite being small in number (with an estimated 700-1,000 active fighters), ABM has carried out more high-profile attacks, such as its attempt to assassinate the Minister of Interior, Mohamed Ibrahim, in September 2013 and the downing of an Egyptian helicopter in January 2014.

## How and why did the group pledge allegiance to IS?

ABM's pledge of allegiance followed a harsh crackdown on its leadership by Egyptian security forces after the loss of its leader and dozens of senior figures of the movement between March and October 2014.<sup>79</sup> This loss of its leader was a major stimulus for IS to

73 <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/egypt%E2%80%99s-war-terror-isis-president-sisi-and-us-led-coalition>

74 <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/9378fb64-aacf-45c8-90ef-170827cee329> Other groups, such as the Muhammad Jamal Network in the Sinai, reportedly also have training camps in southern Libya.

75 'Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis's Oath of Allegiance to the Islamic State', *Wikistrat*, February 2015, p. 4. At the time of these attacks, al-Qaeda in Iraq was still part of AQ Core and AQ Core sent out a statement following the attack claiming responsibility.

76 Al-Masri was killed by US forces in April 2010, along with his chief, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, who is regularly shown in video statements by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/al-qaeda-egypt-sinai-insurgency-growing-influence.html#ixzz3RRvfgk32>

77 See: 'Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis's Oath of Allegiance to the Islamic State', p. 5.

78 <http://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2015/01/30/egypt-sinai-attack> In July 2012 The group first gained attention by blowing up a gas pipeline to Israel and Jordan and a month later fired rockets from Sinai to Eilat. In September 2012 the group claimed responsibility for the attack on an Israeli border patrol, in reaction to the release of what was perceived as an anti-Islam film 'Innocence of Muslims'.

79 Among them were: Tawfiq Mohammad Faraj (Abu Abdullah), founder of ABM, Muhamad al-Sayyid Mansur al-Tukhi (Abu Ubayda), Shadi al-Menei, Khaled al-Menei and former commanders Hesham al-Ashamwy and Faysal Husayn Salim Sulayman. See: 'Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis's Oath of Allegiance to the Islamic State', p. 5.

send representatives to the Sinai and forge an alliance that would split the ABM into two camps: one that accepted the *bay'at* and another, the 'Nile Valley group, which has refused to pledge allegiance and has remained generally pro-AQ, without an official affiliation.<sup>80</sup> This can be compared to the recent *bay'at* by Boko Haram at a time when the group faced a heavy security crackdown by Nigerian authorities.

However, ties between IS and ABM run deeper, and evidence suggests that IS tried to co-opt the group as early as a year ago, through various methods. Egyptian security officials revealed that IS members were travelling through underground tunnels between Rafah and the Gaza strip. Also, captured jihadis in Egypt revealed brokered deals between IS and ABM on the supply of weapons in exchange for the *bay'at* and fighters.<sup>81</sup> And in October 2014, reportedly, two ABM envoys travelled to Syria to meet IS leaders, asking for money and weapons and discussing a pledge of loyalty.<sup>82</sup>

In September 2014, IS reportedly sent a jihadist known as Musa'id Abu Qatmah to the Sinai through Gaza to win support for the *bay'at* from Sinai-based groups. Earlier, Egyptian authorities had arrested 11 men carrying letters from a Libya-based IS figure, Abu Ahmad al-Libi, reportedly encouraging the groups to unite under one banner before pledging allegiance to IS, in exchange for which they would receive the funding and arms they needed.<sup>83</sup> As we know, ABM indeed succeeded in unifying under its guidance a number of smaller jihadi groups<sup>84</sup> – 19 groups according to some local observers.<sup>85</sup> This also explains why IS rejected the *bay'at* by jihadi groups in Gaza, reportedly due to infighting and divisions among the groups. The scattered structure of jihadis in Gaza would make it difficult for pro-IS cells to be taken seriously.<sup>86</sup>

The Sinai represents an important strategic environment for IS because of its proximity to Israel and to Cairo, one of the centres of the Arab world. The ability to engage in activity in this area may also allow it to deflect some attention from the ongoing struggle in Iraq and drag more actors into an open conflict with IS, for example the Egyptian government.

IS also stepped up its references to the Sinai as an important land for jihad. On 21 September 2014, the IS spokesman al-Adnani hailed the ABM for its attacks against the 'guards of the Jews, the soldiers of Sisi'.<sup>87</sup> In al-Baghdadi's November 2014 speech, as well as in a pamphlet released in December of the same year, the Sinai was hailed by IS as the promised land for jihad.<sup>88</sup> Also, the intensification of attacks by ABM against the Egyptian regime since the fall of Morsi's government has allowed IS to extend its war against the 'apostate' Egyptian

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80 The Nile Valley group is concerned with the brutal tactics of IS, which are likely to alienate the local population, as happened in the 1990s when jihadism provoked a strong popular backlash. See: [www.nytimes.com/2014/11/11/world/middleeast/egyptian-militant-group-pledges-loyalty-to-isis.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/11/world/middleeast/egyptian-militant-group-pledges-loyalty-to-isis.html?_r=0).

81 'Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis' Oath of Allegiance to the Islamic State', p. 8.

82 [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/11/world/middleeast/egyptian-militant-group-pledges-loyalty-to-isis.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/11/world/middleeast/egyptian-militant-group-pledges-loyalty-to-isis.html?_r=2).

83 'Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis' Oath of Allegiance to the Islamic State', p. 8.

84 'Man hum Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis?' (who are Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis), *al-Nahar*, 12 July 2013.

85 Ibid.

86 al-Ghoul, A., 'Islamists State rejected Gaza jihadis' offer of allegiance', *al-Monitor*, 5 January 2015.

87 al-Adnani, 'Indeed your lord is ever watchful', 21 September 2014. <http://worldanalysis.net/14/2014/09/english-text-indeed-lord-ever-watchful-shaykh-abu-muhammad-al-adnani-ash-shami/>

88 One can think of the pamphlet released on 1 December 2014 by Abu Mus'ab al-Gharib 'Come to the Sinai to elevate the foundations of your state'.

regime. The struggle against the ‘near’ enemy here is something which does not contradict IS objectives, as the group’s thin ideology focuses on expansion and control of territory, which allows it to be more flexible in its franchising strategy. Another factor of interest is the proximity of Egypt to Libya and the existence of smuggling networks between Libya and the Sinai, with contact being reported between IS branches in Libya and the Sinai – the latter sending its fighters to Libya to train in its training camps.

Importantly, the tribal nature of Sinai society makes it easier for IS to use its divide-and-rule strategies vis-à-vis the tribes in Syria and Iraq – experience gained after operating for more than ten years in tribal territories. IS has sought to buy the loyalty of influential tribal leaders, targeting the younger generation within tribes for partnerships.<sup>89</sup> The feeling of being isolated from Egypt’s development plans and the longstanding feeling of injustice among Sinai populations, added to security crackdowns on its residents, are other factors that could increase the outreach of Wilayat Sinai to local populations. This can be compared to IS tactics in the marginalised al-Anbar province in Iraq, which allowed it to expand, as well as to its presence in other marginalised regions, such as eastern Libya.

## What has changed since Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis made its pledge to IS?

Following its *bay’at*, the Wilayat Sinai branch has stepped up its attacks against the Egyptian army as its ‘near’ enemy and has displayed increasing sophistication in planning high-profile attacks.<sup>90</sup> In terms of adopting IS methods of governance, there are only modest signs of an expanded programme mimicking IS governance elsewhere. In January 2015, Wilayat Sinai burned drugs captured from traffickers and distributed funds to residents of Rafah after their homes were demolished as part of the government’s plan to create a buffer zone near the border with Gaza to combat terrorism.<sup>91</sup>

The group has also started to use media tactics similar to those used by IS. Shortly before pledging its allegiance to IS, the group issued videos of several beheadings of suspected informants. AQ has objected to such videos, believing they damage its brand. Since November 2014, the group has also stepped up its propaganda. The general narrative here is replete with anti-Jewish and anti-Western rhetoric, hailing its record in fighting the Jews – the “strongest enemies of the Umma” – and referring to Sisi and his ‘camp’ as the “servants of the Jews”, saying that Egypt should be purged from Sisi and his government, as the necessary step to “liberate the Dome of the Rocks”. Shortly after its allegiance pledge, Wilayat Sinai released a video with graphic images of its attacks against the Egyptian army, while referring to IS expansion in Libya and Yemen.<sup>92</sup> Not much later, Wilayat Sinai issued a statement on its operations in November that went largely unnoticed in the media, most

89 For more information on IS strategies towards the tribes, see: Hassan, H. (2014), ‘Isis exploits tribal fault lines to control its territory’, *The Observer*, 26 October. Hassan, H., ‘Hassan Hassan on how to uproot ISIS in Deir Ezzor’

90 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/egypt-sinai-wilaya-attacks-army.html#ixzz3QsO8dYY5>

91 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/01/28/the-islamic-states-model/>

92 “I start my will with a letter to Sisi the fifth, servant of the Jews. This message is from the Sinai and everybody knows what is the Sinai. Sinai: land of lions and heroes. Sinai: land of legends and battles. Sinai: cemetery of the enemies and the bastards. Know well what she is (Sinai)... Sisi the fifth. We will be the swords who will cut your heads, your hands and your feet, God willing. We will be the bombs that will destroy your thrones and castles, God willing. We will be the packages that will break your backs, God willing.” <https://justpaste.it/fursan-t-swlansar>, <http://vimeo.com/111891198> (video).

of it were car bombs targeting police officers in northern Sinai.<sup>93</sup> On 2 December 2014, the group claimed responsibility for the death of an American petroleum worker.<sup>94</sup> More recently, on 29 January 2015, it claimed responsibility for a sophisticated attack on ten military headquarters, including the largest military base in al-Arish, Battalion 101, which also serves as a prison, dubbed by residents as 'Sinai Guantanamo'. The attack, leaving 35 soldiers dead, came just after the declarations by Sisi on the 'success' of its military operations against terror in the Sinai. Immediately after the attack, Wilayat Sinai issued a statement in which it talked for the first time about the number of jihadis involved, referring to as many as one hundred.<sup>95</sup>

The targeting of such a prominent base might also be a way of earning the trust of IS, in the sense of providing them with more rewards (i.e. money, weapons). However, the group is the continued target of a heavy crackdown by the Egyptian military – one of the strongest in the region – and this will hamper its actions, even more so since the overt entrance of Egypt into the war against IS on the Libyan front. The main enabler here, however, is support from the local population: the regime's harsh crackdown on terror tends to be unmeasured and targets also the non-combatant locals (i.e. in Rafah), who, already marginalised, might increase their support for the ABM, viewing the government as the main problem. Repressive tactics by the Egyptian government might, in fact, exacerbate tensions in the Sinai in the coming months, which could favour the ABM.

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93 <https://manbar.me/bian-sina1>

94 [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/12/wilayat\\_sinai\\_takes.php#ixzz3QsUM16iH](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/12/wilayat_sinai_takes.php#ixzz3QsUM16iH)

95 <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/9378fb64-aacf-45c8-90ef-170827cee329>

## 4. The case of Wilayat al-Barqah, Tarablus and Fezzan in Libya

The brutal decapitation of 21 Copts on the north-western shores of Libya in a slick video – *A message signed with blood to the nation of the cross* (16 February)<sup>96</sup> – by jihadis claiming to be part of IS has brought international attention on to Libya as a new territory of IS expansionism. The video is the latest and most brutal manifestation of the rise of the IS Libya branch, which has been active since October 2014.

### Post-revolutionary Libya: a fertile ground for jihadi groups

Establishing IS branches in Libya has been facilitated by the country's chaotic and violent post-revolutionary period, which has been propitious to the general flourishing of jihadi activities on what was already fertile soil. It should be recalled that Libya has a history of jihadism, especially in the south and east. This includes, for example, Cyrenaica Province, a region that suffered decades-long marginalisation under al-Qaddafi's rule.<sup>97</sup> Unsurprisingly, new jihadi groups have germinated since 2011 as a consequence, most of which were under the umbrella of anti-Qaddafi militias during the revolution. A number of factors played significant roles.

To start with, the fall of al-Qaddafi as patron and arbiter of many factions, created a significant security void that fuelled competition and conflicts over control of illicit resources. This resulted in the fast rise of criminal activities such as kidnappings, weapon smuggling, human trafficking and fighting over control of oil facilities.<sup>98</sup> Combined with the massive influx of weapons during the revolution and Libya's porous borders, these factors reinforced transnational jihadi activities across Libya's borders.<sup>99</sup> In 2012, this led to the capture of northern Mali by a Tuareg-led uprising.<sup>100</sup> Similar factors allowed the Algerian jihadi, Mokhtar bel-Mokhtar, former AQIM commander and leader of the al-Murabitun, to find refuge in southern Libya.<sup>101</sup>

Additionally, the battlefields of the Syrian civil war were useful arenas where closer personal ties could be forged between international jihadi networks through fighters in Syria. Such networks would have significant effects on the rise of radical groups in Libya. Notably, after the fall of al-Qaddafi's regime, hundreds of Libyans left for Syria to participate in the fighting against President Assad, using the military knowledge they had acquired at home. While

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96 <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/02/15/isis-beheads-21-christians-promises-to-conquer-rome-by-allahs-permission/>

97 <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/derna-the-sleepy-town-of-islamist-extremism>

98 <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW96-Ilicit-Trafficking-and-Libya's-Transition.pdf>

99 <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/0807/Libya-s-greatest-security-threat-its-porous-southern-border> For information on illicit trade and armed groups in Libya's transition, see: Shaw, M. and Mangan, F., *Illicit Trafficking and Libya's Transition: Profits and Losses*. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2014. The aftermath of the revolution has increased conflicts over the control over illicit resources.

100 <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/jihadisms-foothold-in-libya>

101 <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/4282/libya-mokhtar-belmokhtar>

exact numbers are not known, Libyans rank among the leading nationalities in Syria,<sup>102</sup> having even created their own battalions.<sup>103</sup> Libya has also been a major hub for the smuggling of weapons to Syria. In April 2013, the United Nations Security Council published a report documenting the extent of arms smuggling from Libya to Syria, Mali and the Sinai, fuelling regional conflicts.<sup>104</sup>

Finally, Libya has become a general transfer point for fighters heading from Western Europe and the Maghreb to Syria. Some of them have been trained in camps in Misrata, Benghazi and the Green Mountain area in the east of the country.<sup>105</sup> Although there are many gaps in our knowledge on the whereabouts of the training camps, Ansar al-Sharia is said to have mobile training camps around Benghazi and elsewhere in Libya.<sup>106</sup> Other AQIM training camps are thought to be located near the southern borders, and recent reports have pointed to the presence of a 'few' IS camps in the east, close to Derna and south of Sirte.<sup>107</sup> In general, groups like Ansar al-Sharia or the IS branch are known for their role in providing logistical assistance to foreign fighters in Libya and for the smuggling of weapons and fighters to Syria.<sup>108</sup>

The presence of jihadi groups in Libya is mostly centred on the areas of Benghazi, Sirte and Derna – close to the Sirte basin, in which most of the country's oil reserves are found.<sup>109</sup> While Benghazi and Sirte are largely under Ansar al-Sharia's control, the city of Derna is mostly under the control of the IS branch. The Fajr Libya operation dominates Misrata and Tripoli in the northwest. Table 4 below provides an overview of the main cities in Libya under control of jihadi groups.

One of the largest of Libya's new jihadi groups is Ansar al-Sharia (AaS), which was announced in February 2012 in Benghazi.<sup>110</sup> The group can be seen as an amorphous coalition of jihadi brigades, with most of its activities centred on Benghazi. AaS has loose ties to several smaller Salafi-jihadi battalions in Benghazi, Derna and Sirte.<sup>111</sup> The group aims to

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102 <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=53811>, <http://almokhtsar.com/node/159303>

103 This was the case for Liwa al-Umma, for example, created by the Libyan-Irish national, Mahdi al-Hareti, a previous commander in the Tripoli Brigade, in August 2012, with dozens of Libyans among its ranks. <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/07/28/world/meast/syria-libya-fighters/>

104 United Nations Security Council, 'Final report of the panel of experts pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) concerning Libya', 19 February 2014. <http://goo.gl/pizdX1>

105 Zelin, A., 'Libya beyond Benghazi', *The Journal of International Security Affairs*. [https://www.academia.edu/5892768/Libya\\_Beyond\\_Benghazi](https://www.academia.edu/5892768/Libya_Beyond_Benghazi)

106 <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/new-evidence-on-ansar-al-sharia-in-libya-training-camps> Also see: Carlino, L., 'Ansar al-Shari'a: transforming Libya into a land of jihad', in *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 12, Issue 1, 9 January 2014

107 <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/isil-training-camps-in--libya-closely-monitored-us-general>

108 Carlino, L., 'Ansar al-Shari'a: transforming Libya into a land of jihad', in *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 12, Issue 1, 9 January 2014. Also see: Fitzgerald, M., 'The Syrian Rebels' Libyan Weapon', *Foreign Policy*, August 9, 2012.

109 These oil reserves are, however, unlikely to be exploited soon, given Libya's oil infrastructure. Libya's oil installations are deep in the interior and Libya does not have small-scale oil refineries as Iraq does, but rather big refineries in the hands of militants, making it harder to turn oil fields into wealth. See: Brennan, K. and Johnson, K. 'The Islamic State of Libya Isn't Much of a State', *Foreign Policy*, 17 February 2015. Also see: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/terrorist-targeting-of-the-libyan-oil-and-gas-sector>

110 For information on Islamism in Libya post-Qaddafi, see: Zelin, A., *Islamism in Libya*, American Foreign Policy Council, April 2013. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/islamism-in-libya>

111 The group's prominent members have shared the experience of incarceration in the infamous Abu Salim prison. See: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/18/it-wasnt-us/>

create an Islamic state and purge Libya from Western influences. It has branded elections as un-Islamic and destroyed Sufi shrines. In June 2014 it declared the Islamic Emirate of Benghazi. The group's leadership has denied any ties to AQ, although the recent death of its leader, al-Zahawi, was eulogised by AQAP and AQIM leadership in official statements.<sup>112</sup>

**Table 4. An overview of the main cities in Libya under control of jihadi groups**

City	Controlling group	Background
<b>Benghazi</b>	Benghazi Shura Council	Created in June 2014 in reaction to Hiftar's campaign. It is a coalition of Ansar al-Sharia, Libya Shield 1 and the February 17 <sup>th</sup> Brigade
<b>Derna</b>	IS is in control of the city, but other groups control parts of Derna	The most important other groups are the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade (ASMB), Ansar al-Sharia of Derna and the Derna Shura Council. These groups have rejected the pledge of allegiance to the IS and formed a jihadi alliance, the Mujahedeen Shura Council (MSC) of Derna (12 December 2014), led by Salim Derby. The group cooperates with IS in Derna against Hiftar.
<b>Sirte</b>	Ansar al-Sharia	In recent months, the influence of IS in the city has been growing. On 19 February, armed men claiming to belong to IS captured most of the government buildings in Sirte and its media stations released videos of its <i>hisbah</i> men patrolling the city for sharia-compliance. Yet, the group's presence in Sirte is still limited.

These jihadi groups, themselves fragmented, can be considered collectively as a 'third party' in a political struggle that has pitted two camps against each other: those advocating the political isolation of former al-Qaddafi elites and those whose interests are linked to the old regime, often having served as elites under al-Qaddafi. The first camp is represented by Libya Dawn,<sup>113</sup> a diverse Islamist and Misrata-led coalition formed as an opposition front to Qaddafi-era General Khalifa Hiftar's operation against Islamists in Benghazi. In October, Libya Dawn took over Tripoli and most of western Libya. The second is represented by Hiftar and his allies – Zintani militias and Federalist forces in control of Libya's eastern oil field. Hiftar launched his Dignity Operation in May 2014 against the Islamic militias of Benghazi. It is supported by the House of Representatives (HoR), which was elected in June and now is seated in Tobruk. The HoR has been recognised by the international community as Libya's interim parliament, but was declared unconstitutional by Libya's Supreme Court.<sup>114</sup> This binary conflict has permeated Libya's transition politics, with semi-autonomous cities being often loosely allied to one of the two sides. A complicating factor here is the fact that the country

112 [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/02/ansar\\_al\\_sharia\\_liby\\_2.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/02/ansar_al_sharia_liby_2.php)

113 The Libyan Dawn operation was assembled in July 2014 to evict the anti-Islamist Zintani militias from Tripoli. It is a loose coalition of Misratan, Islamist and Berber militias based in Libya's northwest, while dominated by the Libyan branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. From June to September 2014, Libya Dawn forces fought for control of Tripoli, ultimately vanquishing the House of Representatives, which fled to Tobruk.

114 The June parliament was elected by less than 20% of the eligible voters, thus lacking nationwide legitimacy. For a good background on Libya's political situation post-2011, see: 'Situation Report', Libya, Tony Blair Faith Foundation, <http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/country-profiles/libya/situation-report>.

has become the theatre of a proxy war since 2011.<sup>115</sup> Sudan, Qatar and Turkey have been financiers of Islamist groups of diverse orientations. Egypt and the UAE back Hiftar.<sup>116</sup>

While jihadi groups (such as Ansar al-Sharia) have joined with the broad Libya Dawn coalition in a strategic alliance against a common enemy, important differences separate them from the Libyan MB (Justice and Reconstruction Party) and more localised Islamists within the coalition. The main divisions here are between the more local agenda of Islamist parties (mostly based in Libya’s west) and the more regional and ideological agendas of jihadi groups (mostly based in Libya’s east).<sup>117</sup>

**Table 5. The two competing governments**

Name of group	Centrist, non-Islamist camp	Islamist-revolutionary camp
<b>Name of military operation</b>	Operation Dignity (Launched on 16 May 2014 against the Islamic militias in Benghazi)	Libya Dawn (Launched in July 2014 to evict the anti-Islamist Zintani militias from Tripoli)
<b>Members of the alliance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Hiftar</li> <li>• Zintani militias</li> <li>• Federalist forces in control of Libya’s eastern oil field</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Libyan MB</li> <li>• Nafusa-based groups</li> <li>• Amazigh (Berbers)</li> <li>• Libya’s Grand Mufti</li> <li>• Misrata-led alliance (MLA): West Libya/Libyan Shield</li> <li>• Jihadists and Islamists: East and South</li> </ul>
<b>Regional backers/proxy war</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Egypt/UAE</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Qatar/Sudan/Turkey</li> </ul>
<b>Areas under its control</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tobruk, Bayda</li> <li>• Northeast Libya (but not Benghazi, Derna and Sirte)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tripoli area (since July 2014)/ Western Libya</li> <li>• Part of Benghazi (since August 2014)</li> </ul>
<b>Heads of government</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abdallah al-Thinni</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Omar al-Hassi</li> </ul>

New players such as IS have profited from this war of attrition between Libya’s two blocs. Both Operation Dignity and Libya Dawn are fragmented and have been weakened by ongoing fighting. Recently, in February 2015, IS in Libya rejected Libya Dawn as ‘*Sahawat*’,<sup>118</sup> as did IS with rival groups in Syria, even calling Tripoli’s prime minister, Omar al-Hassi an ‘apostate’, thus prompting an open confrontation between the IS and Fajr Libya.<sup>119</sup> Ideologically,

115 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/10/24/is-libya-a-proxy-war/>

116 Sudan’s Islamist regime, led by President Omar al-Bashir, is known for its support of neighbouring Islamist groups, in a pan-Islamic logic. Qatar has been a major supporter of the MB, as part of its soft-power regional strategy and power ambitions within the Gulf Cooperation Council. Turkey’s AKP-led government has supported Islamist groups regionally, having close relations with Qatar since the Arab uprisings, supporting both the MB and Syrian rebels. Since the deposition of Morsi’s government in 2013, Egypt’s military-led government has become a staunch opponent of the MB, domestically and regionally, supported by Gulf allies such as the KSA and the UAE. For these Gulf regimes, the political project defended by the MB is a threat to their regimes and legitimacy.

117 <http://warontherocks.com/2015/02/the-dawn-divides-the-islamic-state-and-libyas-inter-islamist-war/4/>

118 ‘Sahawat’ refers to the Sunna tribal insurgency against al-Qaeda in Iraq. The tribal militias were crucial in reducing jihadi violence in Iraq between 2007 and 2008.

119 <http://goo.gl/7cxbqw>

IS brands democracy as blasphemous and has condemned the MB for its participation in elections and a 'deviant' Islamist project.<sup>120</sup> Although it is too early to say, the extension of the war against IS in Libya might lead to a repositioning of alliances, with growing rifts in the Islamist camp. Whether this may open venues for dialogue between Libya's competing governments depends on whether both parties would consider regional jihadis – IS and AQ-inspired groups – a bigger common threat than each other.<sup>121</sup>

## IS expansion in Libya: motivation and methods

Libya represents a strategic area for international jihadi networks for the reasons mentioned above. The absence of a central state, porous borders, the presence of a massive arsenal of weapons and a strategic location make it fertile ground for non-state armed groups. An environment favourable to illicit criminal activities offers an important source of income for jihadi groups.

For IS, Libya plays an important role in its network of foreign fighters, arms and jihadi activities. Before its decision to create a branch in Libya, IS was already actively recruiting fighters in Libya and profiting from its wide arsenal of arms. Given the high number of Tunisians and Libyans fighting for IS, Libya is even more importantly strategically for the group.<sup>122</sup> IS in Libya seems to have more foreign fighters than groups like Ansar al-Sharia. Derna seems to be the destination of most foreigners.<sup>123</sup>

Recently, material from a prominent IS supporter was posted online. In an essay, the author lays down what he considers the strategic benefits of Libya to IS.<sup>124</sup> Although it is unclear what position the author holds within IS, the text – which is a propaganda text to recruit jihadis – offers insights into the thinking of an IS supporter and provides an IS viewpoint regarding the advantages of creating a Libyan franchise:

- The author refers to the crucial location of Libya, “looking upon the sea, the desert and the mountains and six states: Egypt, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Algeria and Tunisia” and the homogeneity of Libyans being Sunna Muslims.
- The new province could reduce the pressure on IS in Syria and Iraq because of the air-strikes.
- Weak borders and a long coast would allow for the exploitation of the lucrative business of human trafficking.
- The abundance of weapons from al-Qaddafi's era and the revolution are discussed in detail, referring to the fact that this allowed the jihadis in northern Mali to take over two-thirds of the country in a short time.
- The text calls upon jihadis to make their way to Libya as soon as possible and urges the potential of Libya to be tapped into soon.

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120 IS has been vehemently opposed to the MB, a position that differs from AQ Core, which endorsed the Arab revolutions and the MB government. For more details, see Section I of this report.

121 <http://warontherocks.com/2015/02/the-dawn-divides-the-islamic-state-and-libyas-inter-islamist-war/4/>

122 <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=53811>, <http://almokhtsar.com/node/159303>

123 Interviews with anonymous local observers.

124 <http://justpaste.it/ly1> For an English translation, see: Winter, C., 'Libya: the strategic gateway for the Islamic State', *Translation and analysis of IS recruitment propaganda for Libya*, Quilliam Foundation, February 2015.

The upshot here is that Libya is seen as having clear strategic advantages and that its importance as a new IS province has been underestimated. The greatest concentration of IS influence is in the eastern city of Derna. At the moment of its allegiance, the Derna Youth Islamic Council (DYIC) was already the strongest force in the city and considered as one of the most radical groups with a strong military wing.<sup>125</sup> As in the case of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, IS thus favoured the strongest local group. Moreover, the city as such has a record of exporting fighters to the Iraqi and Syrian contexts – reinforcing the crucial role of personal ties in the expansion of IS (as was the case of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis). Also, although there have been clashes between local groups in Derna (i.e. Ansar al-Sharia, DYIC and Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade), they have been relatively small and localised, given that they share a common enemy. This might have played in favour of the collective *bay'at* in Derna, where, despite the refusal of groups to pledge allegiance to IS, no major clashes have occurred and a future scenario of more defections and allegiances to IS is not unlikely.

Rather than fighting local jihadi groups in Libya, IS has tried to co-opt them. In cases where groups refused to pledge allegiance, no large-scale confrontations have occurred so far. This does not necessarily mean that IS in Libya follows a different tactic on the ground than in Syria, where infighting with al-Nusra has characterised the jihadi landscape since mid-2013.<sup>126</sup> One could rather say that the presence of a common enemy unites these different jihadi groups, although this situation could alter quickly if the common enemy disappears, as happened in Syria late 2013.

IS has nurtured alliances with AQ-linked groups, profiting from criminal activities to expand its reach in the country. This is most likely a result of the presence of a strong enemy, necessitating coordination in times of fighting, but also of a more fragmented jihadi scenery lacking the deeply entranced networks of official AQ branches, such as AQAP or AQIM. Ansar al-Sharia, rather than being a unified organisation, is more of an amorphous coalition of Salafi-jihadi groups in east Libya with no leadership structure.<sup>127</sup> Also, while Ansar al-Sharia, along with other groups (such as Ansar al-Sharia in Derna and the Omar Abdul Rahman Brigades) have close proximity to AQ, no official AQ branches were established, as was the case with AQIM or AQAP. With the unfolding of the revolution in 2011, AQ affiliates have exploited the lawlessness and a mass weapons arsenal, such as AQIM did in southern Libya. However, AQ loyalty has not prevented these groups from coordinating or sometimes even operating under the umbrella of IS.

There are examples of the IS tendency to co-opt local jihadi groups and cooperate with them. Ansar al-Sharia remains loyal to AQ but has been cooperating with IS in Sirte, Derna and Benghazi, where it is most powerful. So far, Ansar al-Sharia has maintained its separate identity, but evidence from its media and fighters on social media indicates moves in favour of IS.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, the recent death of its leader, Mohamed al-Zahawi, has led to internal leadership issues that could work in favour of its members joining IS, which would thus profit from the leadership void. According to local media, al-Zahawi intended to join IS just before his death. Some media suggest that his death would have caused friction between AQ and IS, referring to an intercepted letter from members of IS in Libya to al-Baghdadi criticising

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125 <http://goo.gl/xW9rHk>

126 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-gained-strength-in-libya-by-co-opting-local-jihadists-1424217492>

127 <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/09/12/world/africa/libya-attack-jihadists/> (See comments by Libyan expert Noman Benothman).

128 <http://www.alarab.co.uk/?id=27449> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjVE65V0X9w#t=12>

what they call the 'deviations' of Ansar al-Sharia since the death of al-Zahawi. In particular, they note its doctrinal looseness, referring to its alliances with Fajr Libya and the Abu Salim Brigade, criticised for their MB majority and cooperation with 'apostate' groups.<sup>129</sup>

The leader of the Tunisian Ansar al-Sharia, Abu Ayadh al-Tunisi – with no formal links with Ansar al-Sharia in Libya – has relocated to the west of Libya, after facing a security crackdown. He has switched his allegiance from AQ to IS, following an IS visit to its self-proclaimed capital of Raqqa (Syria).<sup>130</sup> Other media sources report the possibility of mergers of local jihadi groups in the south, allegedly led by Abu Ayadh and Mokthar Belmokthar, leader of al-Murabitun, who has also found refuge in southern Libya, transferring his activities from Mali to the city of Sabha.<sup>131</sup>

More recently, the commander of the attack on the Mabrouk oil fields (3 February 2015), despite his allegiance to IS, was actually part of an off-shoot of AQIM, the Brigade Tarek Ibn Ziyad. The brigade has been operating in the southern Sahara and neighbouring Sahel region and gained prominence by kidnapping Westerners and demanding high ransoms.<sup>132</sup> Facing French military operations in the Sahel region, the group struck an alliance with Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, although the attack was perpetrated by the brigade alone and under the umbrella of IS, according to the Libyan Ministry of Interior.<sup>133</sup>

## Wilayat al-Barqah (Cyrenaica)

On 5 October 2014, a video was released of a gathering in the eastern town of Derna of dozens of young men collectively pledging allegiance to IS. Later, IS released photos confirming the pledge of allegiance,<sup>134</sup> dubbed 'Extending our hands to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi', which is the title of a booklet written by IS mufti, the Bahraini Turki Ben Ali, in which he sets out evidence to support the creation of the Caliphate. The pledge was received by a Saudi national, Abu Habeeb al-Jazrawi, sent to Derna by IS and appointed as IS judge of the city.

The groundwork for establishing this first official IS set-up was carried out by some influential Libyan fighters sent by IS commanders to create support from local jihadi groups. These men mostly belonged to the al-Battar Brigade, one of the first foreign fighter units in Syria, composed of Libyans who were part of the same Brigade in Libya that had fought against al-Qaddafi, and later went to Syria to fight alongside IS in Hassakah and Deir Ezzor.<sup>135</sup>

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129 <http://www.albawabhnews.com/1063126>

130 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-gained-strength-in-libya-by-co-opting-local-jihadists-1424217492>

131 <http://goo.gl/3T4w8v>, <http://goo.gl/3T4w8v>

132 The group was named after its leader, Abdelhamid Abu Zeid, a former leading figure of the former GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) who became the head of the Tariq Ibn Ziyad Brigade, the largest and most active AQIM brigades in the Sahel. The kidnapping of Westerners led to friction with Belmokthar, also linked to AQIM. The latter criticised Abu Zeid's kidnappings of civilians, considering it contrary to 'jihad'. <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/AO-HISTOIRE/hal-01081769v1>

133 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-gained-strength-in-libya-by-co-opting-local-jihadists-1424217492>

134 <https://twitter.com/nbenotman/status/538425325513105409>

135 <http://www.aymennjawad.org/15416/bayah-to-baghdadi-foreign-support-for-abu-bakr-al>

IS also sent one of its senior leaders, Abu Nabil al-Anbari, to Derna in September 2014 to prepare for the creation of its branch.<sup>136</sup> Abu Nabil al-Anbari enlisted the help of two envoys to Libya to be appointed as governor (*wali*) and religious judge (*shari'*), one of them being the Saudi al-Jazrawi. A Yemeni national, Abu Bara'a al-Azdi, was appointed as governor of Derna, a choice that reportedly caused friction with other groups, such as Ansar al-Sharia in Derna, which refused to pledge allegiance. As early as mid-September, al-Jazrawi would have visited Libya with a group of high IS officials to forge ties with local jihadi groups. Moreover, and revealing of the importance that IS places on Libya, the IS mufti, the Bahraini national Turki Ben Ali, had recently arrived in Sirte. He had, in earlier years, visited Libya and given lectures at local mosques.

It is not remarkable that Derna made headlines for its allegiance to the IS. The city has a history of jihadism, having exported a relatively high number of fighters for jihad since the 1980s to Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. US terrorism experts discovered that the town sent far more men per capita than any other city in the region.<sup>137</sup> The pledge of allegiance in Derna was made and organised by the Derna Youth Islamic Council (DYIC), a relatively new jihadi militia, which was already the strongest force in Derna and considered one of the most radical local groups.<sup>138</sup> The group was established in April 2013, as a result of the merger of radical Islamist groups in the area and in November 2013 created its military branch, the Army of the Islamic State of Libya. It had gained notoriety for its public executions, the creation of a Sharia Court and a *hisbah* (accountability) department to 'promote virtue and prevent vice'.<sup>139</sup> The group had been engaged in battles with the Abu Salim Brigade and its leader, Salim Derby, who refused to pledge allegiance to IS. Other groups in Derna, such as Ansar al-Sharia of Derna, have also so far refused to pledge allegiance. In addition, on 12 December, DYIC announced the creation of an umbrella group, the Shura Council of Mujahedeen of Derna, following long deliberations with armed groups of Derna and led by Salim Derby. This Shura Council could be considered as something of a counterbalance to IS in Derna,<sup>140</sup> although at present the looming threat from General Hiftar keeps the two sides united against a common enemy.<sup>141</sup>

## Wilayat Tarabulus

Two months after the collective pledge of IS in Derna, IS announced (on 19 November 2014) the creation of the 'Tripoli Province', allegedly consisting of Sirte, Sibrata, al-Ghams, Misrata, Zawaja and cities in the western desert.<sup>142</sup> In the photos published by the office of 'Wilayat Tarabulus', IS shows photos of jihadis pledging allegiance to IS,<sup>143</sup> of arms and a series of SUV cars.

136 al-Anbari is a senior leader within IS, who reportedly spent time in prison with al-Baghdadi in Iraq. <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/11/18/world/isis-libya/index.html>

137 <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/derna-the-sleepy-town-of-islamist-extremism>

138 <http://goo.gl/xW9rHk>

139 <http://goo.gl/xW9rHk>

140 <http://goo.gl/xW9rHk>

141 As for Benghazi, the situation is different because of the ongoing fighting, with many local scholars pushing for the soldiers to fight under one umbrella. Lacking a proper set-up in the city, most IS soldiers are reportedly fighting with different units under the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries on orders from local commanders.

142 <http://goo.gl/YGYo9P>, <https://isdarat.org/?p=3293>

143 <https://twitter.com/Esh6MdzfEhEMdW2/status/534486526957477889>

While IS is active in Tripoli city, it only has a proper set-up in Sirte and has been able to strengthen its control over that city in recent months. On 19 February 2015, armed men claiming to belong to IS captured most of the government buildings in Sirte and its media stations, and released videos of *hisbah* men patrolling the city and its markets for sharia-compliance.<sup>144</sup> Recently, Sirte's media office released photos of a military procession in Sirte and of IS mufti, Turki Ben Ali, delivering a sermon in a local mosque.<sup>145</sup> Sirte has been the stronghold of Ansar al-Sharia since the fall of al-Qaddafi and has so far not pledged allegiance to IS. It is important to note that the group's exact position vis-à-vis AQ remains shadowy and it is closer to an ideological association than any organisational coordination. Ansar al-Sharia has publicly denied any affiliation with AQ, although its leadership has an AQ pedigree and cordial relations with both AQIM and AQAP, as attested by the recent eulogy of AQAP's leadership on the martyrdom of al-Zahawi.<sup>146</sup> Yet, in Sirte, more than in Derna, IS and Ansar al-Sharia are close to each other and there is said to be considerable sympathy among its members towards IS.

### **A short note on Wilayat Fezzan**

There has been less information in the media and in IS media on its self-proclaimed 'Fezzan Province' in southern Libya. IS presence there seems to be limited and focused on facilitating smuggling routes. In February, IS announced that it had burnt the Mabrouk oil field in Fezzan, 170kms southeast of Sirte, killing four petroleum facilities guards and abducting three Filipino workers.

### **What has changed since the Libyan pledges of allegiance to the Islamic State?**

Since December 2014, IS has reportedly ordered its Libyan branch to stop sending fighters to Syria and to focus on domestic attacks in Libya. This has led to a rise in attacks by groups claiming to be part of the self-declared IS provinces in Libya.<sup>147</sup> With the rise of attacks in Libya and the growing military involvement of regional actors, notably Egypt, against IS it is likely that in coming months more jihadis will return from Syria and go to the Libyan battlefield.<sup>148</sup> IS in Libya has also strengthened its calls to foreign fighters, with the release of stories about foreign fighters and martyrdoms.<sup>149</sup>

Moreover, the Libyan IS provinces have also stepped up high-profile attacks since their creation, of which the most recent was the brutal killing of 21 Copts (16 February).<sup>150</sup> IS justified the attack as retaliation against the Coptic Church of Egypt for its alleged implication in the torture or death of Coptic women who had converted to Islam – a logic of 'random

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144 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqDcKkCP\\_Wg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqDcKkCP_Wg), <http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/56077/>

145 <https://twitter.com/AlArabiya/status/569480107477372930>

146 <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/thomas-joscelyn-ansar-al-sharia-libya-leader-met-with-osama-bin-laden-followed-his-methodol/> In the declaration, AQAP's leadership also refers to meetings between al-Zahawi and Ben Laden in the mid-1990s in Sudan. As other Ansar al-Sharia leaders, al-Zahawi had an AQ pedigree, having participated in jihad in Afghanistan.

147 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-gained-strength-in-libya-by-co-opting-local-jihadists-1424217492v>

148 IS wants to create a war with all regional powers, precipitating, in its apocalyptic vision, the end of times.

149 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/01/28/the-islamic-states-model/>

150 <http://goo.gl/Ow1Sdq>

retaliation'.<sup>151</sup> This high-profile attack also allowed IS to mark its presence in Libya, while dragging Egypt into the war. In its cosmic vision of the world, this strengthens its narrative of the end of days' approaching, while it deflects some attention from the battlefield in Syria and Iraq from a tactical viewpoint.

Recently IS has moved westwards in Libya, a move that will raise its credentials among foreign fighters, attracting them to come to Libya. Strengthening its presence in western Libya will put extra pressure on the Libyan Dawn coalition, provoking overt war with Dawn by branding its prime minister an 'apostate'. This was followed by a high-profile attack (27 January 2015) by the IS Tripoli province on the Corinthia Hotel, targeting the 'apostate' prime minister, while also being retaliation for the death of Abu Anas al-Libi in US custody. Subsequently, IS has declared war on both Hiftar's coalition<sup>152</sup> and the Islamist-leaning Libyan Dawn.

**Table 6. Timeline of main actions by IS provinces in Libya**

3 October 2014	Derna Youth Islamic Council pledges allegiance to the IS
10 November 2014	'Supporters in Libya' pledge allegiance to the IS
16 November 2014	IS Tripoli Province declares responsibility for Egyptian and UAE Embassy bombings
25 November 2014	IS reports on government ministry elements repenting in Libya's Barqa Province
27 November 2014	IS claims responsibility for attack on Corinthia Hotel, Tripoli
13 February 2015	IS claims responsibility for suicide attack in Benghazi and IS shows photos of Mufti Turki Ben Ali in Sirte
15 February 2015	IS publishes photos of capture of parts of Sirte and military parade in the city of Nofilia
15 February 2015	IS Tripoli Province publishes photos of 42 officers repenting for working for the Ministry of the Interior
16 February 2015	IS announces the decapitation of 21 Copts in Libya

In terms of governance, Derna is so far the city that comes closest to what IS considers Shari'a compliant governance. The Derna Youth Islamic Council (DYIC) – now part of the IS Barqa province – had already employed similar tactics in terms of public floggings and executions (mostly political assassinations) before it pledged allegiance to IS.<sup>153</sup> Now these activities are carried out under the banner of IS. In Derna and Sirte, IS has also organised *hisbah* (accountability) patrols in streets and markets, to 'promote virtue and prevent vice'.<sup>154</sup> On 15 February, IS announced it had captured parts of Sirte and dispatched its mufti, Turki Ben Ali, to the city.<sup>155</sup>

151 See IS magazine *Dabiq*, Issue 7, 'From hypocrisy to apostasy', 12 February 2015, p. 30. In this issue, IS moreover refers to an earlier attack on a church in Baghdad in 2010, which then was a direct retaliation to the events in Egypt with the disappearance of Coptic women who had converted to Islam. This corresponds to the idea of 'random retaliation' as propagated by Abu Bakr Naji, whose work has been an inspiration for IS (see Section I).

152 In this regard, IS Libya has targeted military officials through car bombs and the burning of their houses and cars, often writing on these houses in black 'apostates' as IS did for the Shia and Christians in Iraq. Other activities are attacks against members of the Libyan army in Benghazi.

153 'Libya: extremists terrorizing Derna residents', *Human Rights Watch*, 27 November 2014.

154 <http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/56077/>

155 <http://goo.gl/kDhhzP>

Although IS in Libya is using similar strategies on the ground and in the media as IS in Iraq and Syria, its control over territories should not be overstated. Only in Derna has IS almost full control of the city, although in other places towards the west, such as Sirte, its presence is limited.<sup>156</sup> Yet, its strength in Libya relies on the protracted conflict between Libya Dawn and Hiftar's Operation Dignity, from which it has profited, declaring war on both sides. So far, the presence of a common enemy has allowed it to nurture ties with local jihadi groups, in a fragmented jihadi landscape lacking deeply entrenched networks of organised jihadi groups such as AQAP in Yemen.

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<sup>156</sup> <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=59268>

# Conclusion

This report aimed to provide insights into recent IS expansion. In November 2014 IS announced the creation of provinces in Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Libya and the Sinai. So far, however, only in Sinai and Libya have these branches shown a significant level of organisational structure, having adopted similar strategies as IS on the ground and the media. By comparing the different provinces, key characteristics of the IS mode of expansion can be seen in terms of objectives, conditions for cooperation, incentives and strategies. The following conclusions can be drawn from this study:

The IS mode of expansion is pragmatic and flexible, able to adapt to different local contexts, facilitated by its 'thin' ideology, which is not constrained by a goal of attacking the far enemy, as was the case for AQ Core. Being largely tribal and Sunna in identity, with a focus on territorial control and expansion, this gives IS more leeway to operate in external contexts. One could argue that the 'IS model' is less at odds with the agendas of local jihadi groups. In this regard, IS is better attuned to (and is itself a product of) the changing nature of jihadi insurgencies since the mid-2000s. Those were rooted in changing political economies and the rise of jihadi groups operating in the grey zone between smuggling networks and jihadism. These groups have profited from situations of state failure and chaos, strengthening their grip over local resources and criminal networks, while benefitting, at least initially, from the frustrations of neglected communities. This relates to the application by IS of the strategy outlined by Abu Bakr Naji on the creation of 'pockets of instability' and 'regions of savagery' in which individuals would search for stabilising factors.

This strategy reverberates through the IS model of expansion. In 2007, it allowed IS to re-emerge from the al-Anbar province in 2007, exploiting similar frustrations among tribal populations in Syria. Outside Syria and Iraq, the IS branches with strongest outreach are also tribal regions with a history of strong neglect by the state – be they Bedouins in the Sinai or the Cyrenaica province in Libya. In a similar vein, IS has exploited the failure of the nation state, capitalising on local rivalries (i.e. tribal fault lines) through a mix of co-optation and semi-delegated rule, while keeping an iron grip on territories under its control. In Syria and Iraq, local strongmen were lured to IS by financial incentives. Maintaining local structures has allowed IS to gain ground quickly in tribal areas. In this regard, franchising in tribal areas such as the Sinai and Libya enables the group to replicate these divide-and-rule strategies. The experience of Libya has shown that IS there has followed a strategy of co-optation with local jihadi groups, playing upon existing rivalries (i.e. between Libya Dawn and Hiftar's coalition) to step up its activities and forge ties with local jihadis against a common enemy.

The success of IS expansion has also been due to the importance it places on personal networks. In both Libya and Egypt, socialisation in IS networks in Iraq under al-Zarqawi proved crucial in IS transmission. In both countries, the leadership and members of local groups (i.e. Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and the Derna Youth Islamic Council) had participated in jihad in Iraq and forged ties with IS leadership. This confirms the conclusions of the sociology of transnational movements (Tarrow, 2005): face-to-face diffusion of movement ideas still seems to be the strongest means for transmission, despite modern means of communication.

Another factor facilitating branch creation by IS is the strength of groups locally vis-à-vis other jihadi groups in the area. IS seems to favour those groups capable of unifying smaller groups (i.e. Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis) and controlling territories (i.e. Derna), and has refused pledges of allegiance by fragmented groups, such as local groups in Gaza. Unification seems to be one of the conditions imposed on local groups. It does not fare well in areas where entrenched organised groups form a barrier to IS expansion. This is the case in Yemen due to the influence of AQAP, which is well established in the local tribal context. Ansar al-Sharia in Libya – while being the largest jihadi group – is a rather amorphous coalition and lacks the organised structure of AQAP, thus facilitating coordination and cooperation with the IS branch in the battlefield, facilitated by the presence of a common enemy.

A further important factor in IS expansion is its tactical timing of branch creations at moments when both IS and local groups are facing considerable challenges. The announcement of IS provinces in November came just a few days after rumours of al-Baghdadi's death after an airstrike. Also, the intensification of high-profile attacks by members of IS branches in Libya and Egypt in recent months might be a tactical move to deflect attention from the battlefield challenges for IS in Syria and Iraq. Meanwhile, for groups pledging allegiance to IS, one can observe that the timing is often influenced by a context of heavy security crackdowns against jihadi groups. This was the case for Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, the Tunisian Ansar al-Sharia leader (Abu Ayadh al-Tunisi) and more recently for Boko Haram. In this regard, as is known from IS's highly sophisticated communication strategy, the media is an important part of the message. By allying with IS, these local groups profit from its brand name to attract more fighters and profit from IS resources.

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