The Role of ISIS as a Religious Terrorist Group in the Instability of Libya in the Post-Gaddafi Era: The Case of Sirte

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Abstract: Stability and security remain the two most important objectives in the post-Gaddafi era since no accord has established a legitimate government in Libya yet. The rivalry of the Tripoli and Tobruk governments has resulted in unabating state insecurity in Libya. This article focuses on the strategic city of Sirte where the insecurity was felt most in the post-Gaddafi era. The significance of this city also comes from its strategic location, which makes it the main target for the political actors that want to control Libya. Deriving from these points, this article analyzes the impact and threat of ISIS as the terrorist group in Sirte.

Keywords: Libya; Libyan security; post-Gaddafi era; ISIS; terrorism; terror behavior; Sirte

1. Introduction

Libya has been at a crossroads since the removal of the Gaddafi regime. Today, the country is faced with the struggle to produce a new workable constitution and the effort to unite the country against various militia groups and terrorist organizations that control parts of Libya. Currently, Libya is also trying to form a united army and united security apparatus for domestic security concerns, which are all means of combating the growth of ISIS in the country. Under the auspices of the UN, the “Libyan Political Agreement (LPA)” was contracted in December 2015 in Skhirat, a city in Morocco, to ease these issues. It gathered the members of the competing coalitions together to establish a new inclusive Government of the National Coalition (GNC) (Blanchard 2016, p. 3). This agreement proposes that the GNC presidency council should include representatives from Libya’s important groups and regions that will be responsible for the formal arrangement of national security and decisions on economic areas. On the other hand, the new state council and the House of Representatives (HoR) were composed of former GNC members who retain the legislative power.

Despite the HoR approving the agreement by the end of January 2016, some groups within the HoR proposed procedural cabinet votes and amendments to the constitutional procedure. Members of the House of Representatives who backed General Khalifa Haftar in eastern Libya, for example, voted against the agreement, claiming that leadership of the armed forces should be given to the GNC’s presidency council once it was passed. This event sparked Libya’s second civil war, which is still ongoing.

Deriving from these preliminary remarks, this article analyzes Libya’s insecurity in the post-Gaddafi era by emphasizing the struggle for power in the coastal and strategic city of Sirte, which is located between Tripoli and Benghazi. There are significant reasons selecting Sirte. Firstly, Sirte has abundant oil resources, with more than 65% of Libya’s oil resources located in this city and its region (Rosen 2015). Its oil resources are of strategic importance to the GNC’s presidency council once it was passed. This event sparked Libya’s second civil war, which is still ongoing.

Secondly, it is the birthplace and former stronghold of the late Muammar Gaddafi, which means that Sirte is a city known for its loyalty to Gaddafi. Gaddafi’s overall vision of Africa and the loyalty of the city to him positions Sirte as an administrative center. It was seen as an interim capital of Libya at the start of the revolution...
in 2011. The city enjoyed significant attention from the Gaddafi regime since it was seen as a showroom of Gaddafi. However, since 2014, it has become the epicenter of Libya’s domestic and international conflict.

The civil war and the government’s failure to address structural issues, such as high unemployment, high levels of poverty, and economic and social inequality, and the role of social media platforms have created opportunities for violent and extremist groups such as ISIS to easily persuade radical individuals to believe in and join their causes (Ibrahim 2020; El-Katiri 2012; Sawani 2018a).

Deriving from these points, the article seeks to answer the questions of how and why ISIS emerged at Sirte and what are the impacts and threats facing Sirte from ISIS? How is ISIS exploiting the Libyan conflict in order to control people and territory? And how is ISIS employing universal capabilities and themes for the narratives and propaganda network to influence local political contexts?

The article is structured on the basis of four interrelated parts. The primary section highlights the introduction, research questions, methodology, and the theoretical framework as well as the basic concepts of security, terrorism, jihad, and terror behavior. The second part discusses the road to the Libyan Civil War, causes of violence, the terrorist groups, and the political and socio-economic causes of insecurity and violence in Libya. The third part focuses on the narratives and emergence of ISIS and how ISIS and its supporters have put their narratives into practice in Libya. The fourth part focuses on ISIS’s control and activities in Sirte and the fall of ISIS. The article ends with the conclusion, in which the main arguments are summarized.

2. Methodology

In this study, a qualitative methodology is used. The deductive approach is used to improve consistency and reliability and the article is conducted based on a thematic and chronological design. Meticulous consideration has been given to the categorization and presentation of the topics to ensure that the examination operates relatively, and the topic is narrowed down suitably. With this methodological consideration, the causes of the Libyan Civil War are initially analyzed followed by the challenges associated with ISIS in Libya in the post-Gaddafi era. Then, the article focuses on the incidents in Sirte caused by ISIS in the post-Gaddafi era. Paramount importance is given to primary sources from academic books and articles along with news agencies. Some secondary source materials generated by think tanks, such as research papers and Arabic news items, are also used for analysis to offer socio-historical context for ISIS’s activities.

The main methodological tool is a case study, which is a very common social sciences research method in which the basic unit of analysis is formed by the selection of a single country. According to Peters (1998, pp. 12, 62), a detailed and informative investigation of a single case is typically regarded as theoretical and solely descriptive; however, if done effectively, it can elucidate a concept that would seem to be particularly prominent in one national context and use the national study to further expand that conceptual model. Therefore, a case, if properly assembled and studied, can be used to increase the knowledge span of political science and enhance, or even testify to, selected theories or models directly. This article aims to analyze how ISIS as a terrorist organization caused insecurity in Sirte in both theoretical and practical terms. Through the exercise of independent and critical analysis, the article builds on existing knowledge by using already known material but with new conceptualizations, design, and interpretation. In this way, it is aimed at making a modest contribution to explain the role of ISIS in the instability of Sirte in the post-Gaddafi era.


The studies focused on security, Jihad, terrorism and terror behavior generally deal with non-state terrorist groups in terms of their actions, interpretations, motives, break-
downs, and effects. Nevertheless, conceptual clarifications are arguably required for these four concepts for a clearer perspective and understanding regarding their relation to society (Maogoto 2003, pp. 408, 438; Biegon 2013; Jongman 2017).

The term security is complex and cannot be easily defined. It means “different things to different people” (Baldwin 1997, pp. 5, 26; Mesjasz 2004; Saleh 2010; Anderson 2012; Mathews 1989, pp. 162, 177). Ken Booth (2007) defined security as a “survival–plus”. The term ‘lus’ denotes freedom from life-threatening risks as well as some life options. This is a more literal meaning of security whereby an individual’s life becomes the referent object to be protected alone. From the realist perspective, the absence of risks and threat perceptions to the state’s and individuals’ stability is defined as security. For instance, as stated by Wolfers (1962), “security, in an objective sense, measures the absence of threats to acquired values, in a subjective sense, the absence of fear that such values will be attacked”. This is the “standard” definition in IR theory (Moeller 2001, pp. 8, 10).

Nevertheless, accordingly, national security cannot be seen from the angle of the nation-state alone, as it must encompass all levels of analysis and the different dimensions of threats. The dilemma arises regarding which analytical framework can bring together disparate concerns, such as terrorism, violent conflicts, and jihad, into a single conceptual framework. This is where the human security paradigm comes into play, which encompasses the security of groups and individuals in a wide variety of aspects, from military defense to governmental, financial, cultural, and environmental security: human security prioritizes human beings and the community of humanity over the interests of countries or the global civil society to which they belong.

Human security is a crucial concept in international relations; according to the human security paradigm, state security and individual security are intrinsically connected, yet none can exist without the other. Furthermore, individual security differs from state security in that governments can constitute a threat to individual security (Buzan and Hansen 2009).

When it comes to responding to security concerns, security is inherently normative because without it, human existence is reduced to a fundamental war for survival, as well as difficult decisions between clashing values, e.g., between both the state security and the security of an individual. As a result, human security is concerned with the aims or goals of security policy (Paris 2001, p. 95). Arguably, it is also more appropriate for the instance of Libya than the other definitions, since it gives a comparably better explanation to appreciate various facets of the country’s security issues.

Secondly, terrorism as a phenomenon that leads to multiple factors, such as the political, ideological, economic, religious, and social environment, is required to be portrayed in such a way that it illuminates its characteristics and components (Schaeffer 2010; San-Akca 2016; Proulx 2012; Berkowitz 2018, pp. 709, 748). As a concept, terrorism is a very contested term. Simply stated, as noted by Jongman (2017), terrorism can be referred to as the “calculated use of violence to create a general climate of fear in a population to achieve a political objective”.

However, ISIS’s actions of religious cruelty call into question traditional definitions of cruelty and terrorism, which view terrorism as a logical practice of violence to attain a political target. Fundamentalist terrorism has not always met these classic characteristics after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Terrorism is no longer used mainly as a strategic instrument to accomplish political goals, as it was in previous terrorist attacks (Cronin and Ludes 2004). Jihadist groups such as ISIS, for instance, regard their activities as a holy duty and reject their opponents’ humanity. In this way, killing locals became a goal in itself. ISIS is the latest example in this vein, where the violence itself has been defined as a “sacred” duty. In other words, the rationality behind ISIS’s actions is only understood within the framework of their ideology (Rickenbacher 2018, pp. 157, 178).

As the third term, it is worth noting that jihad is mentioned in the Holy Quran, which refers to all Muslims’ responsibility to strive (jihad) to realize and fulfill God’s will, which is characterized as living a life rich in values, resisting oppression and injustice, reforming and building a just society, and participating in military combat to preserve one’s
community and faith if necessary. There are two sorts of Quranic verses that allude to jihad as armed struggle: defensive, which stresses fighting against attackers, and aggression or expansionist, which is a comparatively more comprehensive command to battle all non-believers and spread the message as well as public order (Biegon 2013, pp. 485, 487).

Since the 1960s, there has been a globalization of jihad in both religious thought and violent struggles. However, the idea of jihad has been widely used as well as misused, especially by liberation and resistance movements along with terrorist and extremism organizations to recruit, legitimate, and motivate their followers (Wright 2006). In modern times, ISIS’s operations have gone beyond the traditional Islamic principles of jihad and have no bounds. Their comprehension extends to the use of any weapons or means, which they justify in light of their numerous foes, including Muslim governments as well as their Western supporters. They oppose Islamic law’s constraints on the means and goals of a lawful jihad, such as the requirement that violence be proportional and that only the appropriate amount of force be used to stop the enemy so that innocent lives are not targeted, and the jihad having to be stated by the head of the country. According to these fanatics, Muslims who oppose particular Muslims or states or stay apolitical are no longer Muslims, but atheists, infidels, or enemies of God, against whom all real Muslims must fight holy war, or in other words, “jihad” (Esposito 2003).

Fourthly, analysis of terror behavior attempts to explain the stages of the terrorist group’s mentality before the attack. As Olson (2012) argues, most terrorist groups, regardless of their location, nature, and type, noticeably act locally and think globally. It can also be said that they tend to draw inspiration from other foreign terrorist groups to shape their thinking and actions. Further research shows that acts of terrorism include speeches by certain religious and political elites that incite racial, religious, or politically motivated violence, dissemination of audiovisual messages that incite violence at ideological, political, religious, and racial levels, incitement to political, racial and religious undertakings and recruitment of people to commit violence (Smith 2008, pp. 1, 6; Smith and Damphousse 2009).

As suggested by Vidino (2011), in order to understand these concepts, various theories and research on the respective concept should first be understood. This is due to the fact that understanding the processes related to security, jihad, terrorism, and terrorist acts allows researchers and professionals to develop a better understanding of the ideas and concepts related to mutually beneficial approaches and strategies that can be applied to any terrorist activity and opinion-oriented action.

Social movement theory highlights the attitudes of groups as well as individuals “to be exposed to concepts of security, jihad, terrorism, and acts of terror because they are members of formal, informal, or semi-structured organizations” (Beck 2008, pp. 1565, 1581). These groups tend to place emphasis on certain social issues in society, generating misleading narratives and promising unknowing citizens better solutions to these societal issues. Social movements are viewed as anti-elite and anti-establishment because of their characteristics and see these enemies as the reason the problem exists in the first place (Prud’homme 2019). Most of these social movements employ negative religious rhetoric and teachings to organize, enlist, and enforce their violent and extremist agendas because anti-establishment narratives connect to some extent in people’s minds (Pieri and Zenn 2018, pp. 645, 672). To secure their survival and continuation, these organizations continue to utilize their platforms to fan the flames of violence and extremism. (Pieri and Zenn 2018; Prud’homme 2019, p. 8).

The theory of social psychology focuses on how the relationships, interactions, and engagement of individuals and groups lead to their acceptance of extremist and radical ideologies (Williams 2020). According to Bélanger et al. (2019), sing the “3 N Model” of needs, narratives and networks, it is possible to adopt extreme and violent worldviews associated with radicalization.

As a result, terrorists and jihadist groups not only utilize these models to train and inspire people to accept their beliefs, but they also use their needs and weaknesses to
spread this false narrative of ideological violence and racial and religious hatred to attain their objectives (Bélanger et al. 2019, pp. 2, 7).

Poverty, inequity, alienation, unemployment, corruption, economic suffering, and sociocultural and religious discrimination are all necessary conditions for and drivers of radicalization, as well as factors in extremist views, according to the theory of economic deprivation (McCauley and Moskalenko 2008, pp. 415, 433; Kruglanski et al. 2019).

Much of the research linking these theoretical models to ISIS’s model of terrorism connects ISIS’s politics and religious-political elites’ passive instrumentation and coordination of social movement platforms, the challenges of economic deprivation, and the exploitation of narratives, needs and networks.

Given these viewpoints, it is important to highlight that any anti-radicalization activity should take structural elements, persons, and behaviors into consideration. The patterns and negative impacts of social movements, as well as their connections, are suited for addressing paradoxes linked with radicalization and re-radicalization in society. This is due to the fact that these three factors are critical to understanding radicalization and de-radicalization even now. Following these conceptual discussions, this article uses the terms security, Jihad, terrorism, and terror behavior to explain how ISIS emerged and took control of Sirte.

4. The Road to the Libyan Civil War: A Cause for Continual Violence

Although analysis of the Libyan conflict goes back to the Gaddafi regime’s collapse back in 2011, this article places emphasis on the period of conflict in Libya starting with the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) in 2015, also known as the Skhirat Agreement.

The Skhirat Agreement, which was established in December 2015 under the United Nation’s auspices, gathered the members of the competing coalitions, primarily members of the Libyan Grand National Assembly and the House of Representatives (HoR). Under this agreement, the coalition parties were expected to establish a new inclusive Government of National Coalition (GNC) (Blanchard 2016, p. 5). The Skhirat Agreement then aimed to create a stable Libyan Government called the Government of National Accord (GNA). The Skhirat agreement provides that nine members of the GNA presidency council encompassing heads of Libyan ministries such as defense, finance, labor, etc., will have national security and economic decision-making power. In contrast, the new state council, composed of former GNC members and the House of Representatives (HoR), retains the legislative power.

The changed perception of the political councils and local militias towards the agreement versus the GNC’s attempts to implement the agreement has subsequently defined Libyan politics (Lacher 2015, p. 1). Although the HoR had approved the agreement by the end of January 2016, the HoR leadership refused to adopt the GNA-proposed cabinet by imposing a procedural vote and a constitutional modification procedure. Nevertheless, the agreement mainly failed because numerous conflicting armed groups in various regions did not consent to a central state (Obeidi 2019, pp. 253, 282). After the failure of the Skhirat Agreement, Libya encountered escalated violence and civil war, mainly between the forces of the GNA that the United Nations recognized under Prime Minister Fayez Mustafa al-Sarraj and both the Tobruk-led Government, and the “Libyan National Army (LNA)” under the control of General Khalifa Haftar. More dramatically, the conflict was not restricted to these two sides and expanded to include many militias and radical terrorist groups, including ISIS, fighting both with the GNA and the LNA forces and among themselves (Lacher 2015, p. 7).

The maintenance of security over north-eastern Libya is mainly ensured by the pro-Haftar forces, and since September 2016, they have controlled the oil facilities in the Sirte basin. With the help of these facilities, he was able to claim a certain degree of legitimacy as the leader of the Libyan army and increased the willingness of his allies to reject the GNA presidency. Haftar has gained the support of Western countries based on the claim that he is eliminating all forms of Islamic groups in Libya, while sparing Salafi to gain support
from the various military groups. In return, the Salafi would be the sole religious body that controls all religious affairs. Haftar aims to eliminate groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, Mujahideen Shura groups, and Ansar-al-Sharia (Sawani 2018a). Therefore, in the case of Sirte, an indirect and brief pointer on how religion is used for political advantage has been reflected as the members of Salafi that joined Haftar have served as soldiers taking over cities since they became part of the LNA.

Meanwhile, the GNA was pursuing the goal of bringing all oil facilities under its control, which continued to escalate the conflict between GNA’s Libyan Army and HoR’s LNA under Haftar (Strazzari and Tholens 2014). In Western Libya, some members of the former GNC and some militia forces working with the Libya Dawn group decided to support the GNA and henceforth backed the GNA presidency council. The Libyan Dawn was formed as a coalition in 2014 by the Islamist armed groups in the country to defend the GNC against Haftar’s military offensive. However, this has become one of the problems Libya continues to face today as the conflicting parties in Libya are using armed religious groups to win the war. At the same time, extremist religious groups are trying to find a place in the Libyan political scene during the conflict, and this became a factor of instability for both the present and future of Libya.

5. The Terrorist Groups’ Cause of Insecurity and Violence in Libya

Security challenges in Libya are mainly caused by the presence of various terrorist organizations that are predominant nationwide. For example, the Islamist State of Iraq (ISIS) is predominant in Sirte, al-Qaeda is effective in Sirte and Jufra, while “Ansar al-Sharia” and “the Benghazi Revolutionary Shura Council (BRSC)” are both predominant in Benghazi. These facts demonstrate that radical terrorist groups are a nationwide security problem (Toaldo and Fitzgerald 2016, cited in Eriksson and Bohman 2018, p. 15). The most influential al-Qaeda-linked group is the Salafi-jihadi group “Ansar al-sharia (ASL), which is divided into two groups, namely, the “Ansar al-Sharia Brigade in Benghazi (ASB)” and the “Ansa al-Sharia in Derna (ASD)”. “Ansar al-Sharia” groups are also operational in Sirte, Ajdabiya, and Tripoli (Pack et al. 2017, p. 2).

The main terrorist group that has affected the conflict dynamism of Libya is ISIS. In 2014, the coastal cities of Sirte and Derna were occupied by ISIS. ISIS tried to impose a system of governance using public executions to instill a sense of fear in the people. As a result, other groups had to put their differences aside to chase out ISIS because it had penetrated the weaknesses of Libyan security (Toaldo and Fitzgerald 2016, cited in Eriksson and Bohman 2018, p. 15). The al-Qaeda and ISIS-linked groups and other groups with connections to global Jihad have taken advantage of the fact that the country has become a failed state. As a result of the insecurity, instability, divisions between different political factions, and the lack of an accountable and legitimate government to implant themselves in different country regions, “Jihadi stateless” was created in the summer of 2014. Pack et al. (2017, p. 2) confirmed that in the post-Gaddafi era, al-Qaeda and ISIS were involved in many terrorist attacks, killings, and assassinations against journalists, judges, and civil society activists in Libya. This is evidenced by car bombings and the attacks on Benghazi, Sirte, and Tripoli government buildings. The United States ambassador also narrowly avoided being killed when a rocket-propelled attack failed to detonate in Benghazi. Furthermore, these Islamist groups pose a problem for Libya and other North African countries since they use Libya as a base to attack other neighboring countries (Eriksson and Bohman 2018, p. 2).

According to Sawani (2017, pp. 171, 186), even if the GNA and the political agreement come through this challenging contest, Libyan authorities will still have to cope with resistance coming from Islamist insurgent groups and particularly the Libyan branch of the surviving members of ISIS, who have threatened all those who are against their ideology. In this connection, another major security threat that has destabilized the country is the illegitimate armed groups and militias who are continually expanding their roles. The term illegitimate has been used to signify the legal notion of legitimacy bestowed on leaders
by the citizens. The armed groups and terrorist organizations have not been politically elected to occupy political positions and are therefore not legitimate, although they de facto controlled some cities. These groups were initially used as an instrument of the revolution and liberation but subsequently turned into a significant threat to the establishment of a peaceful Libya. In other words, although they were used for a constructive purpose during the war, they are now seen as one of the problems facing the emergence of a new Libya (Gerard 2011, cited in El-Katiri 2012, p. 16).

Following the death of Gaddafi in 2011, the country faced an upsurge in armed groups, especially in Tripoli. There were numerous armed groups in Libya because of the regional and tribal differences that existed during the Libyan War. Similarly, according to Obeidi (2019), the majority of militias were formed during the civil war as a result of regional and ethnic differences and a desire to operate independently. Even though all wanted to topple Gaddafi, these armed groups were not unified (Munoz 2011, cited in El-Katiri 2012, p. 17).

There have been many violent clashes between militias and the interim government (El-Katiri 2012). Some armed groups have operated as the Tripoli provisional army by operating checkpoints at airports and landmark buildings where meaningful diplomatic representations reside. Some militia groups even control banks, oil facilities, public institutions, and companies. Furthermore, by jeopardizing the interim government’s ability to perform its security duty, they allow terrorist organizations and other jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda from North Africa to set up training camps in Libya (El-Katiri 2012, p. 17).

At the political level, the militia interferes with the interim government by not allowing them to perform their administrative duty. For instance, they changed boards and directors of public companies and public institutions without consulting the Libyan Government (El-Katiri 2012). Also, they refused to surrender their weapons and give in to the interim government because they believed they would be prevented from contributing to the development of the state, just like in the case of Tunisia and Egypt. These armed groups are also involved in property vandalism, kidnapping, trading in narcotics, and arms trafficking, including the sale of sophisticated weapons such as Man-Portable air defense systems and missiles to terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda (El-Katiri 2012, p. 20). Consequently, these armed groups stand as one of the main factors of instability and violence in Libya.

6. The Political Sources of Insecurity and Terrorism in Libya

Many studies including Carboni and Moody (2018), (Esfandiari and Heideman 2015, p. 7), Isard et al. (2017), El-Katiri (2012), etc., have underlined that the structural causes of the conflict in Libya are derived from political challenges. These researchers aimed to analyze the post-war security instability in the new Libyan state by connecting the conflict to grievances against the Gaddafi administration.

Political instability in the country was an institutional failure. Acemoğlu and Robinson (2013) argued that internal instability is caused by the breakdown of institutions, whether they are authoritarian or democratic institutions. This is because institutions constitute a mechanism that produces the desired behavior of individuals and groups in a polity. The evidence of such an authoritarian institutional collapse can be seen at the end of Gaddafi’s regime. Tribalism and localism emerged as the main dynamics of the society. Also, the rentier nature of the state once more revealed that the weakened institutions of the state created networks of clientelism and patronage. The conflict further escalated with the addition of the external actors’ support for the fighting sides’ factions (Varvelli 2017). Furthermore, as analyzed in greater depth below, the emergence of the militias linked to terrorist organizations has had an undeniable impact on the shape and conduct of politics, economics, and social life. Consequently, the country turned into a failed state and became a haven for armed and terrorist groups. The Libyan Revolution that initially sought for human rights and freedom led to a more insecure environment than in the Gaddafi era.

Administrative issues are another political factor causing Libya’s instability. According to Sawani (2017), the country’s decayed political and administrative structure following
Gaddafi’s demise was partly due to the weakness of the Jamahiriya philosophy and organization that had maintained it. Jamahiriya was described as the government by the people, for the people, with no outside influences dictating the course of action for the Libyan people (Imam et al. 2014, p. 1152). In Libya, the development and maintenance of credible governmental institutions capable of representing and serving the will of the public has long been a concern. Gaddafi’s anti-imperialist rhetoric fell short of his pledges to build national institutions that would allow the masses to be sovereign. Instead, an unbreakable authoritarian regime was put into practice.

Allen (2019) accepts that Gaddafi’s centralization and personality traits not only directed the establishment of the country’s administrative and bureaucratic systems, but have also hampered the existence of a cohesive opposition and a robust civil society, both of which are required for democracy to take hold. As a result, one of the primary problems of the post-Gaddafi era might be how to restructure those institutions and create a strong civil society in order to accomplish a transition to democracy (Van Genugten 2011, p. 71).

Another obstacle that poses a concern for the administration is the requirement for the detribalization of the administrative and political structures. For example, tribal identity is used by 80% of rural regions to describe themselves rather than any other identity (Sawani 2017). It is important to mention that tribal ties performed a crucial role in the government during the time of Gaddafi and King Idris. As per Sawani (2018b, p. 807), this reality impeded the political structure’s functioning and put the new institutions’ future functioning in jeopardy.

7. The Socio-Economic Sources of Insecurity and Terrorism in Libya

The economy of Libya under Gaddafi experienced rapid growth at the beginning of his reign because of popular policies that promoted the living standards of Libyans. An example of such a policy was the Green Revolution, which promoted increased agricultural production. This was marked by the land reforms that mandated the use of all lands and the transfer of ownership from Italian settlers to Libyans. Government subsidies supported the Green Revolution to reduce the production costs of agricultural products.

The oil production sector also expanded simply because of the state policies that mandated foreign oil producers to nationalize 51 percent of the ownership and operations of the companies (Vandewalle 2008, pp. 9, 53). For example, a significant proportion of British Petroleum was taken over by Libyans between the mid-1970s and the 1990s. All these reforms were aimed at implementing a social system based on Sharia rule. This led to a reduction in the prices of basic needs such as housing and food as well as an increase in the minimum wage.

However, a sharp decline was experienced during the second phase of economic reforms that took place in the 1990s. This was characterized by the increased privatization of consumer goods produced in the country. The drastic import substitution strategy disturbed the system since most consumer goods were imported. This led to several protests because of a lack of transparency on the licensing of most of the local companies, which reflected a clandestine strategy. As a result, Libyans were skeptical about the distribution of gains created by market reforms introduced in the 1990s, which mostly favored Gaddafi supporters. As a result, there was a high percentage of youth unemployment of approximately 27%.

Furthermore, the high inflation rate, rising housing and food prices, and unequal income distribution only widened the gap between the rich and the poor. Therefore, this was a reversal of the popular economic policies that had promoted the growth of the Libyan economy (Sawani 2018b).

The Libyan civil war has had a significant impact on the population’s socioeconomic status, which has traditionally been supported by the welfare state. The drop in oil output, which is considered the biggest contributor to GDP, was clearly a major setback for the Libyan government. Indeed, the oil industry accounted for 54 percent of the overall
GDP and 83 percent of government income in 2010 (Echevarría and García-Enríquez 2018, pp. 592, 608).

This enabled Gaddafi’s administration to offer Libyans a living standard similar to some Western countries. Libya became the wealthiest country in North Africa as a result of oil profits, with a GDP per capita of more than 29,000 US dollars and a human development index of 0.76. Prior to the conflict, the per capita income remained high, hovering at 15,000 US dollars in 2010 (World Bank 2018).

Libya has also become a safe haven for individuals migrating to Europe. In 2016, around 200,000 migrants were waiting in Libya to cross to Europe. Libya’s migration concerns were referred to as a “special case” in a 2016 State Department report on trafficking in persons. According to research by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a UN Migration Agency, 55,001 migrants arrived by sea in Europe in 2017, with 1504 casualties between January and July. In 2018, these numbers increased to 111,753 arrivals and 2401 deaths (IOM 2018).

As a result, with the downfall of the Gaddafi regime, the welfare system that provided people with health care, free education, and financial help for housing collapsed (Imam et al. 2014, p. 1153). According to Haasz, many children do not have access to school and colleges in the post-revolutionary era; since schools have been demolished, school books are scarce, and displaced children are unable to attend school. In addition, numerous universities in the eastern half of the nation have closed.

The constant attacks from armed groups and militias have created unrest in various regions. In a society lacking peace, it becomes inherently difficult to realize stable political processes or to attain any reasonable development. For this reason, insecurity in Libya poses a huge threat to state building and reduces the tendency to reach feasible nation-building policies.

After discussing the road to the Libyan Civil War, causes of violence, terrorist groups, and the political and socio-economic causes of insecurity and violence in Libya, the next part focuses on the narratives and emergence of ISIS and how ISIS and its supporters have put their narratives into practice in Libya.

8. The Narratives and Emergence of ISIS in Libya

The term “Islamic State” refers to an Islamic government that rules the whole Muslim world. The Caliphate was established to manage Muslim affairs according to God’s rules and to regulate their people’s lives according to Islamic religious law principles (Crooke 2015, pp. 56, 70). ISIS’s agenda revolves around the Caliphate as an Islamic utopia. ISIS employs a new and distinct militant “Salafi” ideology/religious reasoning to defend, attract, legitimize, and inspire its members to accomplish its aims. ISIS declared the Islamic State (IS) as a global Caliphate in June 2014, with “Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi” as its Caliph. Baghdadi claims to have complete decision-making authority over all Muslims, Muslim movements, groups, and institutions in this manner. ISIS claims that there is only one interpretation of Islamic law, Sharia, and that different schools of Islamic law are not recognized. Sunni imams and religious figures who oppose ISIS’s takeover and disagree with the group’s brutal version of Islam are labelled enemies and persecuted (Gerges 2014, pp. 393, 343). Furthermore, ISIS aims to portray the Caliphate as a working and prospering state with well-functioning public services, ample food, and a gradually increasing economy. ISIS portrays the Caliphate as a superior alternate to the Westphalian state structure, a place where Muslims can live in peace and devotion. ISIS relies on this narrative to recruit foreign fighters and migrants. (Gartenstein-Ross et al. 2016, pp. 6, 7) identified nine major storylines and motifs that ISIS utilizes to recruit foreign soldiers and jihadist groups.

8.1. The Winner’s Message: Projecting a Strong Image While Masking Flaws

ISIS’s external strategy is themed around power projection. The Islamic State must show that it is rising, has military power, and is increasing its geographical reach in order to encourage foreign soldiers and migrants to abandon their comfortable homes and join the
caliphate. IS also aims to demonstrate to al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadists that it has a greater chance of growing than al-Qaeda. If jihadists feel the IS system is unsustainable, they are unlikely to leave al-Qaeda, which has demonstrated its resiliency in over twenty years of conflict with the West. IS Winning Information consists of several parts. ISIS has made its battlefield and organizational accomplishments public, projecting the appearance that the group is always recruiting new soldiers and expanding its territory. ISIS brags about its triumphs via official and unofficial media outlets, which have created high-tech videos of IS fighters on the front lines. The message was echoed by thousands of ISIS supporters on social media, who flooded social media sites such as Twitter with news of the group’s emergence as a winner. Other films and photographs released by ISIS affiliates outside of Syria and Iraq illustrate the group’s military power in new areas, with highly armed men taking part in training drills or marching through the streets waving ISIS flags. ISIS leverages its worldwide military victories to convey the appearance that it is an influential force on the ground.

For example, ISIS has highlighted its success in nearby countries by attracting militants from countries such as Libya and Somalia. ISIS seeks to convince local jihadists to join the ranks by giving the impression that ISIS is expanding into the surrounding region. ISIS has utilized violence to successfully spread the message of its victories. To advertise its existence and provide the idea that the organization is acquiring influence in other regions, it has carried out high-profile terrorist acts in states other than Syria and Iraq. For example, only a week after ISIS withdrew from the Syrian city of Kobani (at the time, ISIS’s largest loss in Syria), the group published a video depicting Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh being burnt to death. After his jet crashed in eastern Syria in December 2014, he was imprisoned. Early in January, ISIS claimed to have executed al-Kasasbeh. However, the jihadists held off on releasing videos of the executions. ISIS was able to shift the media attention from its military battle to its violence—which, as indicated above, might be perceived as a show of power—by broadcasting the footage after the loss of Kobani (Gartenstein-Ross and Moreng 2015, pp. 13, 18).

8.2. Discrediting Other Jihadist Organizations, Such As Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, by Weakening Their Authority

The Islamic State is attempting to undermine the authority of its primary jihadist rivals, al-Qaeda and the Taliban. ISIS must demonstrate to local militants that it has better jihadist credentials and is militarily stronger in order to successfully expand into new battlefields where al-Qaeda already has a strong foothold. Similarly, ISIS in Afghanistan must establish that it is more legitimate than the Taliban and that it can survive Taliban countermeasures. ISIS has begun to fight these organizations since its expansion prospects are dependent on the outcome of its struggle with al-Qaeda and, to a lesser extent, the Taliban. ISIS has made it a point to question its religious and political legitimacy. ISIS alludes to the Caliphate’s foundation as proof that it is the only credible jihadist group and that it is courageous and decisive, whereas its jihadist opponents are frightened and terrified. ISIS has also accused al-Qaeda and other militant organizations of straying from the Salafi jihadist organization’s manhaj (religious approach). ISIS claims that al-Qaeda has a people-centered approach to government, and that as a result, the organization has abandoned Sharia precepts. ISIS said in the inaugural edition of Dabiq that al-Qaeda “prioritised popularisation and rationalisation”, and that they were “embarrassed by accepting undeniable Sharia fundamentals such as takfir”, former Muslim communications. These claims are intended to undermine al-Qaeda’s religious legitimacy and to promote the illegality of political Islamists (Joscelyn 2017).

8.3. Accusing Political Islamist Organizations, Such As the Muslim Brotherhood, of Deviant Methodology

ISIS has also undertaken a ferocious rhetorical assault against political Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. ISIS’s contempt of political Islamist organizations is ingrained in the group’s doctrines. Democracy, according to Salafi jihadists, is a kind
of blame shifting (polytheism) since it elevates the rule of man over the rule of God. As a result, ISIS condemns political Islamists for employing a “deviant methodology” and abandoning Sharia “basics”. ISIS’s vitriolic attacks against political Islamists are tough to stomach. Unprecedented in the Salafi jihadist movement, al-Qaeda has a history of attacking political Islamists, but ISIS has recently downplayed that attitude (Joscelyn 2017).

8.4. Spreading Discord among Enemy Ranks: Spreading Falsehoods in Order to Emphasize, Aggravate, or Create Divisions within Opposing Groups’ Ranks

ISIS has made it clear that it wants to divide its opponents. ISIS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani promised in an audio message in October 2015 that the group would “divide the group and shatter” the ranks of opposition groups. This remark, in particular, runs counter to al-Qaeda’s strategic objective, which is to unify the jihadist group and warn of fitna (division). ISIS, on the other hand, sees the defeat of its jihadist rival as an opportunity to expand. Even more al-Qaeda militants will join ISIS, believing it to be the winning horse in the global jihadi competition, if rival jihadist groups are partitioned or ISIS can give the impression that this is happening. Furthermore, if it appears that al-Qaeda is collapsing from within, militants will flock to ISIS.

The theory behind this technique is similar to ISIS’s overall expansion plan: if defections reach a “saturation point”, the group will “perpetuate itself [and] itself”, according to John Cantlie’s earlier comment regarding the group’s momentum-based approach. ISIS’s propaganda strategy is designed to split its opponents using this strategic rationale. ISIS’s divide-and-conquer approach incorporates deception and disinformation (Dauber et al. 2019, pp. 17, 31).

8.5. Exploiting Sectarian Tensions: Creating Conflict between Sunni and Shia, Generally with the Goal of Driving Sunnis to Seek ISIS’s Protection

ISIS has tried to transfer its sectarian tactics to nations with large Shiite populations, such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Yemen, as it grows out of the Syria-Iraq battlefield. To stoke Sunni-Shia tensions, ISIS has used a two-pronged strategy of sectarian discourse and targeted bloodshed. Anti-Shia rhetoric is prevalent in ISIS propaganda in the listed nations. ISIS “Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi”, for example, called for Yemeni jihadists to be “hard on the Houthi Rafidah since they are Kuffar apostates” in a November 2014 audio message (Winter 2015a). At the same time, ISIS has carried out high-profile operations against Shia targets, focusing on mosques in particular. In reality, in some instances, ISIS has named Shiites as the group’s top priority enemy: Baghdadi directed ISIS supporters in the Arab Peninsula to battle Shites before targeting the regime in a November 2014 statement. In the region, there are Saudi and Western interests. ISIS’s ultimate purpose in instigating sectarian warfare is to depict itself as the vanguard and guardian of Sunnis across the world, while its objectives vary significantly in each country.

8.6. The Caliphate as an Islamic Utopia: Portraying the Caliphate as a Devout, Harmonious, and Flourishing Islamic State

The Caliphate is portrayed as an Islamic utopia in ISIS propaganda. ISIS tries to persuade outsiders that the Caliphate is really the only area where Sharia is followed in the same way it was during the time of the prophet Muhammad’s first followers. Furthermore, ISIS aspires to portray the Caliphate as a viable and affluent state with strong public services, abundant food, and a booming economy. ISIS uses this strategy to portray the Caliphate as a better alternative to the Westphalian state structure, a place where Muslims may live in peace and piety. This story is crucial for ISIS’s recruitment of foreign warriors and migration. ISIS has devoted a significant amount of resources to spreading the Islamic paradise myth. Charlie Winter discovered that more than 50% of ISIS’s media highlighted different components of the utopian concept in a month-long study examining ISIS’s propaganda production (Saltman and Smith 2015).
8.7. Jihadist Adventure and Camaraderie: Extol Jihad as a Source of Brotherhood and Enthusiasm

Themes of adventure, excitement, and companionship abound in ISIS propaganda, which is aimed mostly at Muslim males in their teens and early twenties. The organization has created sleek battlefield movies that closely resemble violent computer games like Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto. Many ISIS recruitment films feature rocket launchers, mines, and assault weapons, as if to say, “If you join us, you’ll be able to shoot these things”, (Dauber et al. 2019, pp. 17, 31). ISIS presents its war as a chance for young fighters to play out their fantasies in real life by using symbols from violent video games in its propaganda. ISIS also seeks to exploit the need for connection and community among foreign soldiers. ISIS fosters the idea of unity and camaraderie among its fighters, portraying the Caliphate’s soldiers as a close-knit group.

8.8. Creating a Schism among Muslims and the West: Creating Conflicts between Muslims in the West and Their Societies in Order to Energize Muslims to Embrace the Caliphate

The Caliphate and the “Islamic camp” are pitted against the West and the “Kufr camp” by ISIS to motivate Muslims in the West. ISIS supporters have been mobilized and united by the belief that the West is trying to invade Islam. ISIS has elaborated on this premise in an attempt to create division among Western Muslims and their society, claiming that this will push Western Muslims to join the Caliphate. In the sixth edition of Dabiq, an essay titled “Extinction in the Grey Zone” outlines this strategic rationale. The presence of the caliph “increased the political, social, economic, and emotional effect of any act by the jihadists against the angry warriors, driving the crusaders themselves to actively destroy the grey zones”, according to Dabiq’s essay. As attacks start rising and the political climate in the West becomes more intolerant, Western Muslims will be forced to choose between two options: “apostate and embrace the kuffr religion... to live amongst the kuffr without hardship, or... perform hijrah to the Islamic State and thus escape persecution from the crusader governments and citizens” (Saltman and Smith 2015).

8.9. Religious Responsibility to Join the Caliphate: Using Religious Teaching to Compel Muslims to Join the Caliphate

ISIS also uses force and threats to get Muslims to join the Caliphate. “Anyone who believes in Allah does not sleep as a leader who defeats them with a sword, until he becomes Khalifa and gets designated Amrul-Mu’minn, whether that leader is righteous or guilty”, declared Ahmed ibn Hambal, the founder of the Sunni school of Jurisprudence. The Wilayat Ninawa media agency released a video in March 2015 depicting ISIS’s efforts to instill guilt and mobilize Muslims (Shuja al Deen 2016). The film, titled “A message from those who have been forgiven to those who have not been pardoned”, features two ISIS warriors who are deaf. Its goal is to confront Muslims who have not yet joined the group. There are no reasons for persons without impairments when deaf people, who are generally free from jihad commitments, may join ISIS and fight.

In Libya, ISIS uses similar storylines and adjusts its rhetoric to capitalize on civil unrest. The Quilliam Research Center translated a paper regarding ISIS in Libya in 2015, which is the terrorist group’s ultimate strategy (Winter 2015a). ISIS invaded Libya to capitalize on the disarray that followed the 2011 revolution. Instead of cooperating with other Salafi groups, the group focused on implementing its own program and organization. Other Islamist movements and rival Libyan government forces were ISIS’s adversaries. To build a large cadre of militants, ISIS concentrated its forces on Libya, did not deploy Libyan members to Syria, and amalgamated with some of the country’s local militias. ISIS’s essential plan was based upon three core objectives:

i. Treating Libya as a new Islamic state (The Caliphate).
ii. Access to both desert Africa and across the Mediterranean to Europe.
iii. Obtaining military support to be used to fuel other conflicts in the region.
ISIS made its first appearance in Libya in the city of Derna on the eastern coast at the beginning of 2013, which has long been a hotbed of jihadist activity (Ibrahim 2020, p. 46). Multiple attacks were carried out in the city such as the killing of Western tourists and the beheading of 21 Coptic Egyptian Christians. Hundreds of affiliates of the Libyan-led Al-Attar battalion, who had been disputing with ISIS in Syria and Iraq, went to Derna in the spring of 2014, where they founded the Islamic Youth Shura Council (IYSC) (Zelin 2014).

By the time the IYSC came to Derna, numerous other jihadist factions had established themselves in the city, including Ansar al-Sharia and the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade (ASMB), and some considered the IYSC as an unwelcome intruder. Similarly, the IYSC views all armed organizations in the city as competitors, rather than possible allies. The IYSC soon aspired to show that it was militarily and religiously superior to its opponents. The IYSC held a high-profile military parade in April 2014, introducing itself to the residents of Derna, as militants carrying bazookas and other weapons drove through the city streets.

Disputes between the IYSC and the ASMB and its allies increased in early 2015, spiking in May 2015 when an IYSC-affiliated speaker lectured in a mosque in Derna, declaring that ISIS was the only legitimate force in the city. The statement was a clear rebuke to the “Derna Mujahideen Shura Council (DMSC)”, which includes ASMB and several other armies and issued a “final warning” in response to the remarks (Zelin 2014). In response, the IYSC assassinated a DMSC commander, which triggered a tense standoff. On the other hand, the IYSC’s bark proved to be more powerful than its bite. IYSC fighters were forced to flee from Derna to the suburbs just two weeks after the hostilities began. The confrontation between the DMSC and the IYSC signaled the start of a new phase in the IYSC’s information operation against its Islamist rivals in Derna, which was characterized by hatred and malice (Joscelyn 2017).

ISIS fighters in the suburbs approached opposing militias in early December seeking safe passage out of Derna (Kirkpatrick 2015). Following that, ISIS expanded their territory in northern Libya, including the vital city of Sirte.

The next step for ISIS and its devotees was to put their master plan into practice in Libya. First of all, in its quest for territorial expansion, ISIS has introduced a tactic to its worldwide marketing campaign that could be defined as direct diplomacy. Even before announcing a caliphate, ISIS began sending emissaries to various countries to strengthen ties with the jihadists. As a result, using emissaries to recruit regional jihadist groups is an important part of ISIS’s direct diplomacy. ISIS has sent envoys to the Middle East and North Africa to establish direct contact with these organizations. These actions are likely the most crucial aspect of ISIS’s strategy for growth since they allow ISIS officials to form personal contacts with potential jihadist sympathizers. For example, in September 2014, the ISIS leadership sent numerous prominent officials to the Libyan city of Derna to swear allegiance, including Abu al-Bara al-Azadi in Yemen and Abu Habib al-Jazrawi in Saudi Arabia. Fighters who had previously battled against ISIS have been assembled by a group of Islamic State forces’ members. These two individuals remained in Derna and rose through the ranks of ISIS to become prominent officials in the city, securing allegiance and leading ISIS’s Libyan branch (Gartenstein-Ross and Moreng 2015, pp. 12, 15).

ISIS envoys were eager to provide something tangible to the jihadists in exchange for their newfound commitment to the Caliphate. In the summer of 2014, ISIS swept Mosul and occupied much of western Iraq; ISIS was flush with cash. The group was estimated to have generated more than USD 1.2 billion in revenue that year. Shortly thereafter, ISIS began providing substantial funding, sometimes arms, to regional jihadist groups. As a result, ISIS will have to rely on recruiting foreign soldiers to control the local populace in Sirte. According to data, foreigners performed a crucial role in ISIS operations in Sirte. According to intelligence sources in Libya, up to 70% of ISIS fighters are not from the Libyan capital (Almukhtar 2015).

9. ISIS’s Control of Sirte

Sirte is a strategic city located between Tripoli and Benghazi. It is situated to the east of Tripoli and west of Benghazi and possesses abundant oil resources, with more than 65%...
of Libya’s overall oil resources (Rosen 2015). Gaddafi’s vision for Africa positioned Sirte as an administrative center. It was the interim capital of Libya at the start of the revolution in 2011. As a result, it possesses the features of a seat of power. It is therefore worthy of the struggle that took place to gain control of the city. Unlike Benghazi, Sirte enjoyed significant attention from the Gaddafi regime since he had posited it to be the showroom of his new confederation in Africa.

As the toppling of the regime was taking place, a quick move by rebels to capture the city turned it into a battleground among Gaddafi forces, rebels, and in subsequent years, ISIS. The different parties struggling to capture Sirte understood its strategic location in terms of its geography situated between Tripoli and Benghazi, the de jure and de facto capitals, respectively, while Sirte had served as an interim capital. The intensified struggle damaged the development of Gaddafi’s intended showroom beyond recognition. The National Transitional Council’s (NTC) plan to rebuild the city was jeopardized as ISIS looked forward to taking a strategic position in Libya by capturing Sirte (Engel 2014). As the power vacuum continued in Libya, the role and influence of ISIS lay in its efforts to expand and control the sources of power and spread ideas of extremism among Libyan youth, benefiting from the state of conflict and Libya’s civil war between the two governments: the East led by Haftar and the West led by the internationally recognized government.

At this point, it is worth stressing that Jihadism is not a new phenomenon in Libya, and its emergence and development cut across three generations. The first dates back to the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s, after which the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group was formed in 1995 by the veterans of this war. This group focused their activities on Benghazi and Derna, where they fought against Gaddafi’s security forces that wanted to suppress them. The next generation originates from the United States (US) war in Iraq, whereby the recruits of suicide bombers mainly came from Derna. The last generation stems from the 2011 uprising, most of whom were from Benghazi (Beccaro 2018, p. 410).

Sirte is important to ISIS for several reasons. Firstly, being similar to Iraq and Syria, Libya has devolved into a failed state, with no functional central government or organized army capable of halting ISIS’s advance. Second, Libya is strategically located at a geographic crossroads that allows terrorists to travel throughout the Maghreb, which ISIS regards as a natural extension of its Caliphate. Finally, Sirte is a strategically important location with rapid and reasonably easy access to Europe via the Mediterranean. As a result, ISIS can leverage the massive influx of migrants fleeing the country to export its activists and ideology to European countries. Fourth, Sirte is rich in oil and gas reserves, which could be used to fund ISIS operations if they gain control of the city. Finally, ISIS requires the massive military weapons, equipment, and stocks left behind by Qaddafi’s regime in Sirte. These weapons can be distributed to the terrorist group’s operations in the city and other Libyan cities, as well as adjacent African countries and abroad (Winter 2015b).

The evolution of ISIS in Libya, which arrived in the country in 2014, distinguished itself by the relationship of the organization with the local population. Libya is characterized by ethno-religious diversity and the complexity of the political situation involving a range of warring factions composed of militias and tribal forces. Therefore, even though ISIS was able to take advantage of the dissatisfaction and marginalization created by the Gaddafi regime in the Sirte region, it is observed that there was still a disconnection between ISIS and the local population in the sense that they were still considered alien and competitors by the local militias. This prompted ISIS to drive out the other militias and forced them to pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi by killing tribal leaders. As a result, ISIS’s primary objectives are to deter and recruit recruits from other jihadist groups, opposing tribes, “Operation Dawn”, and even “Dignity” troops, as well as to lure international soldiers and sympathizers to Libya’s “Land of the Caliphate” (Azoulay 2015).

The fighting began on 14 March 2015 between the ISIS forces and anti-Gaddafi Islamic fundamentalist armed group of the Libya Shield Force that was formed in 2012. In spring 2015, ISIS captured the city. In August-September 2015, ISIS defeated the pro-Gaddafi loyalists and confirmed its position within the city. ISIS acquired control of Sirte in less than
six months after seizing a radio station, “the Wataniya television studio”, “the immigration centre”, “the Ibn Sina Hospital”, “the University of Sirte”, “local government institutions”, and “the city’s power plant”. The organization also took control of numerous towns near Sirte, thus putting them in charge of the entire region.

The success of ISIS in seizing Sirte was largely due to divisions among existing Islamist factions. The Islamists, as the main adversary, have concentrated their efforts and resources on destroying General Haftar. ISIS was able to find strength in its unresolved conflicts (Alkaff and Siyech 2017). As previously stated, controlling Sirte is critical since the region serves as a crossroads between Europe and Africa, ensuring ISIS has a steady supply of foreign recruits. ISIS’s aim to seize power of Libya’s massive oil and gas reserves would deprive Europe, particularly Italy, of vital natural resources. Sirte is home to major oil facilities, which could provide ISIS with a fresh stream of funding via the oil trade (Alkaff and Siyech 2017, pp. 67, 77).

In the Sirte region, ISIS also attempted to recruit Salafist militants from other nations. Boko Haram, for example, is a fundamentalist terrorist organization that has deployed hundreds of operatives to Libya to aid the Islamic State. ISIS tried to gain the support of the local leaders and the membership of fighters who defected from the Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL), which has already built strong ties and the support of the local leaders. This enabled ISIS to have contact with former Gaddafi officers, develop a vast network of intelligence, and enhance its political and military capabilities. Thus, to summarize, ISIS used a three-pronged approach, including the local collection of information and formation of a local militancy as well as local military operations and governance (Zelin 2015).

The activities of the first two approaches focus on propaganda and indoctrination whereby they can be distinguished by two main activities, which enable ISIS to deal with the complexity of the local population. Thus, Dawa (proselytizing) activities focus on communication and message delivery using tools such as leaflets and billboards. On the other hand, Hisba (religious accountability) activities are mostly religious and thereby emphasize the interpretation of Sharia. At school, boys and girls are separated, and science and philosophy are no longer taught in school. Cigarette businesses are likewise prohibited, and anyone caught smoking will face a fine or other punishment (Schnitt 2015, p. 17). They set up symbols materializing its rules, such as black flags in different corners of Sirte, its police, and the Sharia court (Zelin 2015). ISIS has adopted a new strategy in Sirte. Rather than charging for the use of highways and transportation links, it makes money through illicit operations, including drug and people smuggling (Schnitt 2015, p. 17).

In conclusion, it could be put forward that the lack of harmony between the Libyan actors, the lack of integration, and the struggle for power led to the emergence of ISIS group and the limited role of the state efforts to counter the activities of this group.

10. The Activities of ISIS in Sirte

ISIS’s main goal in Libya is to weaken the Libyan state to the point where it can no longer control its region and thwart ISIS’s expansion. ISIS has claimed responsibility for many assaults against government facilities and foreign symbols in Tripoli, including the “Diplomatic Security Building”, “the Algerian Embassy”, and “the Corinthia Hotel (Fox News 2015)”.

ISIS’s rhetoric of weakening political Islamists is consistent with reports of gunfights with GNC-supporting Islamist militias. The anti-Dawn cry “The dawn of truth, not the dawn of Libya” was also popular among ISIS fans (Engel 2015, p. 3). ISIS is more concerned with local security than any other armed group. In order to maintain security, the group follows rigorous ideological standards and is not afraid to employ force. Its first goal is to monopolize violence in the areas it commands (Khalaf 2015). When ISIS does not have complete control over an area, it turns to locals, who are tired of the conflict’s volatility and unpredictability, to focus on finding the looters. To gain ultimate control of the territory, it then uses a combination of coercion and soft power. Finally, it becomes the exclusive
on-site security provider, with Islamic police serving as the enforcement agency and Shariah serving as the decision-maker or “state” (Khalaf 2015).

For example, ISIS—before being expelled—had the greatest impact on Derna. Through murder and intimidation, the police, army, and judiciary were gradually eradicated. ISIS exploited a loophole to seize territory and gain a source of revenue. ISIS is said to make money via smuggling people. ISIS has also driven Syrians and Iraqis from their homes in order to tighten control over smuggling routes and increase the number of individuals attempting to cross the Mediterranean (Schnitt 2015, p. 15). “The value of this transaction eclipses all current trade and smuggling in the region, and notably empowers terrorist agenda groups, like ISIS”, according to the Transnational Organized Crime and the RHIPTO Global Initiative 2015 Report.

Second, the terrorist group attempted to increase its regional credibility. ISIS recognizes that its draconian trials and procedures against locals are eroding its influence (Khalaf 2015). The resulting turmoil has given the most hardline jihadists the opportunity to form the Islamic State in Libya, which, like its predecessors in Syria and Iraq, has refused to cooperate with “non-Islamic” democratic governments and elections in general. Such a system is considered shirk (idolatry or polytheism), the domination of kuffar (pagans) rather than tawhid (unity) of the ummah (Islamic community).

ISIS has also exploited its collaboration with the transitional authorities to attack other jihadist groups’ propaganda battles, which are perceived as corrupted. ISIS tries to gain credibility by courting locals, forming ties with them, or altering its philosophy (Khalaf 2015). Propaganda also includes “soft” actions such as Hisba (religious obligation) and Dawah (missionary) activities (Engel 2015, p. 4). ISIS is particularly concerned with tribal concerns when it comes to relationship-building initiatives, given the territories it governs are primarily tribal. ISIS propaganda tries to deter and recruit recruits from jihadist groups, opposing tribes, and other non-aligned groups, “Operation Dawn” and even “Dignity” forces, as well as foreign fighters and sympathizers to Libya’s “Land of the Caliphate”.

ISIS also tried to expose Libya’s economic base. They aimed to deprive the government of its primary sources of revenue, such as oil, banking, and taxes, just to weaken the government (Schnitt 2015, p. 19). Both hostile regimes were guilty of this. While both alliances are also driven by ideological, tribal, and geographic motivations, the denial of the ability to pay wages and the prospect of controlling Libyan income have helped to break the alliance between the two camps. In this respect, Sirte, a large port city, appears to be ISIS’s most closely monitored outpost, as it is a significant resource-rich location that generates cash for the terrorist group. The Sirte Basin contains around 80% of Libya’s recoverable reserves. According to oil and government sources (Schnitt 2015, p. 20), in March 2015, ISIS terrorists seized at least two oil fields in Libya and attacked a third, as profiting from Libya’s oil wealth was a long-term goal for the group. ISIS earned income on the black market by selling oil extracted from modest refineries. To summarize, the ISIS onslaught on the Sirte Gulf and Libya’s oil and gas industry threatens to convert Libya’s struggle into a civil war (Al-Ameen 2015).

In conclusion, it could be put forward that the failed state of Libya also greatly contributed to ISIS’s control of Sirte. Even in small ISIS-controlled towns, there were no working banks, hospitals, or government, and the state was eroding. Because the economy is failing, oil shipments have ceased, and prospects for young Libyans are grim; as a result, young Libyans seek sanctuary with ISIS (Jaafari 2015). It is unsurprising that Libya has become an affiliate of ISIS. For decades, people have been the victims of systemic social, economic, and governmental mistreatment. A lack of socioeconomic investment has resulted in high unemployment and a prevalent sense of injustice among adolescents. Following the 2011 revolution, those in power in Libya failed to solve long-standing issues (Eljarh 2015). ISIS uses a variety of tactics to try to win people’s “hearts and minds”, including distributing relief materials. These events were announced on ISIS’s Twitter account (Lefler 2014, pp. 354, 371). The success of jihadist initiatives functioning openly in the mainstream is responsible for their rapid expansion at the local level. Through
philanthropy and public service, they can cultivate a favorable, or at least neutral, public image. ISIS and its affiliates function as both an armed group and social organization that provides essential public services, including anti-drug campaigns and fundraisers to distribute to those in need, setting up checkpoints and patrolling at night, and advertising on social networking sites (Lacher 2015). In Barqa, ISIS funded Hisba (accountability) efforts, such as burning cigarette packs, destroying hookahs, removing “polytheistic” monuments and shrines, and pushing Muslims in souks to abandon their businesses and join mosques. Dawa activities include the distribution of “medical guidance” to children in Benghazi, general assistance to those in need, and sweets and gifts (Engel 2014). ISIS took advantage of the relative calm in Tripoli and performed more relaxed Dawa operations including money and clothing distribution (Engel 2014).

11. The Fall of ISIS

The competition among the radical terrorist groups for the control of the territory and the brutal trials and procedures of ISIS against local people along with other Islamist groups has strained the relationship with potential allies and reduced support for the terrorist organization in Libya. Moreover, ISIS’s taking over of the city did not go smoothly because of some difficulties, including the limited reach and control of the population because they could not penetrate the hinterland. At the beginning of 2016, ISIS was on the decline as a result of pressure from Libyan factions and important local clans, along with military operations by US and NATO forces. According to Sims and Bergen (2018), Sirte was hit by 126 airstrikes by US and NATO forces at that time.

In May 2016, the GNA initiated a new battle to retake Sirte. As a result, in mid-2017, military forces loyal to the GNA and backed by the US conquered Sirte, and many of the remaining ISIS fighters fled to southern Libya (Lewis 2017). ISIS has experienced more blows in Libya since 2016, confining its grip to a few arid villages (Karmon 2018, p. 65). As a result, ISIS could not succeed in presenting itself as a reliable government capable of responding to the needs of the local population. In addition, ISIS was not able to present itself as a legitimate force in Sirte, given that the local militias who fought during the revolution period amply performed this role. Moreover, concerning its military capabilities, ISIS could not resort to heavy weaponry, thus limiting itself to the use of teleoperated rifles and guerrilla tactics.

Nevertheless, despite the peace talks, there is still no permanent settlement in Libya, which leaves ISIS with multiple options to take advantage of Libya’s weak political and security situation. Furthermore, ISIS still has connections with the security forces of the Gaddafi regime. This may still allow ISIS to infiltrate the state apparatus of the new governments and make it difficult to eradicate them (Ibrahim 2020, p. 50). Secondly, illegal immigration to Libya, poverty, and persecution could enable ISIS to spread its extremist religious ideas. Thirdly, Libya has many weapons depots and ISIS can exploit this to arm itself to increase its power or support existing political and religious conflicts across North and sub-Saharan Africa to increase its influence in the region (Strazzari and Tholens 2014, p. 343). Fourthly, instead of moving in large convoys, ISIS has changed its strategy, which is now based on infiltration, unnoticed presence, and hit-and-run tactics. Therefore, there is a risk that ISIS could continue to be a security threat in Libya.

12. Conclusions

Since the uprising started in 2011 in Libya, the Skhirat Agreement that was signed in December 2015 stands as one of the prospects for stability in Libya. The power sharing provided in the agreement tried to share the power between the GNA and HoR, giving the GNA security and economic power, while the HoR retains legislative power. However, the inability to carry out the agreement has led to an increase in violence in Libya. The changing views among the parties and the enabling of one power to control and implement the whole accord has led to continued insecurity.
This article analyzed how ISIS emerged and took control of Sirte in Libya and examined the impact of ISIS as a religious group on a national level. Sirte is the district buffering Tripoli and Benghazi, an interim capital with access to both cities. Its potential as an administrative unit, not just for Libya but also for Africa, makes it a target of various factions. Sirte was a showroom of Gaddafi’s vision and is located in an oil-rich area. Hence, the post-Gaddafi period was characterized by a struggle to capture the city to take advantage of the development that had already taken place.

The strategic location of Sirte makes it a target for ISIS, which became the third bloc in Libya’s civil war. Being no different from the other parts of the country, political-economic, administrative, and socio-economic fragmentation have caused insecurity and instability in the strategic city of Sirte. When ISIS took control of the oil-rich region, the citizens either joined the organization or migrated from the country to survive. As Libya’s power vacuum persists, ISIS’s influence is growing through the control of oil resources and the spread of extremist ideas among Libyan youth, taking advantage of the country’s conflict and civil war between the two governments in the east, led by Haftar, and the west, led by the internationally recognized government.

Various factors led to the decline of ISIS in Sirte. In particular, ISIS’s extremist religious policy with other Islamist groups has strained its relationships with potential allies and reduced support for the terrorist organization. Also, the group’s limited access to the hinterland was another significant factor. Nevertheless, the main factor that dismantled the terrorist organization within Sirte was the military campaign of the GNA supported by the US and NATO forces. This article concluded with the argument that without a permanent settlement in Libya, ISIS still poses a serious security threat to the whole country by exploiting the deteriorating political, social, and economic conditions and already existing political and religious conflicts within and across the country.

There is no doubt that the transition from an authoritarian system to a democratic one is not an easy task. It is a long and arduous process involving the complete transition of a system. Especially without a safe environment, wider political and economic developments are not possible. Therefore, the primary precondition for ending the insecurity and instability in Libya is the complete termination of the civil war in the country.

Subsequently, the initial response to the instability could be the implementation of security reforms, including the strengthening of Libya’s security forces and border security. The security sector reforms, therefore, should start with the collaboration of the two governments and the creation of a united state security force whose loyalty is not to a tribe, region, or political affiliation.

Afterward, the Libyan state and its institutions must provide programs and policies that work to address poverty, unemployment, mismanagement, corruption, and the low level of education, while also promoting social reconciliation programs and improving the living, religious, social, and economic conditions of citizens across the country. For successful transitional justice, decision makers should build institutions that can facilitate interaction within the state. Reparations should be given in a way that is not discriminatory but inclusive, comprehensive, precise, and period bound. Finally, the pursuit of truth, which is key for the healing process in post-conflict Libya, should address and protect the victims of the conflict.

Author Contributions: Both authors (A.M.E. and H.I.) contributed to every section of the article. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
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