

Ansar al-Sharia in Libya: An Enduring Threat

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Abstract

Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL) is one of the most powerful jihadi groups in Libya and it might, in fact, represent a more significant long-term threat than IS' provinces in Libya. However, there are few recent studies of ASL, so exactly what kind of threat the group poses has not been adequately understood. After examining the group's evolution, ideology, strategy and violent activities, we find that ASL is, and most likely will remain, more of a local and regional threat than a global one. The group still poses a significant threat to Western interests, as it has carried out attacks against Western targets in Libya, has close ties to al-Qaida, and operates training camps for international jihadis within its territory.

Keywords: Jihadism, ASL, threat, Libya, dataset

Introduction

The attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi on 11 September 2012 brought the al-Qaida-linked group Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL) into the international spotlight. Once widely considered the most powerful jihadi group in Libya, ASL's activities have been largely overshadowed by the Islamic State's (IS) presence in the country since late 2014 and, as a result, most recent studies of jihadi groups in Libya have focused on IS.[1] However, ASL might represent a more significant long-term threat than IS in Libya due to its close ties to other Islamist and jihadi groups in the country. While some analysts have briefly examined the threat from ASL,[2] this topic merits further attention, as there is no in-depth study of what type of threat the group poses today.

This article aims to further the understanding of ASL by addressing two questions: What kind of threat does ASL pose? Is the group mainly a local and regional threat, or is it also a global one? Threats are usually understood in terms of intent and capability, and our analysis revolves around these dimensions. First, to get an idea of the current state of ASL and its priorities, we have examined the group's evolution, ideology and strategy. We based this part of the study on the group's propaganda output, including communiqués and audiovisual productions, in addition to secondary sources. Second, we sought to establish key features of ASL's violent activities, such as target selection and tactics. For this purpose we compiled a dataset of ASL's violent activities dating back to the attack on the U.S. Consulate on 11 September 2012.

Our data suggest that ASL is, and most likely will remain, more of a local and regional threat than a global one. The group has neither carried out any attacks outside of Libya, nor has it released any official propaganda output in which it explicitly threatens to internationalise its operations. Yet ASL still poses a threat to Western interests, as it has carried out attacks against Western targets in Libya, maintains close ties to al-Qaida, and operates training camps for international jihadis within its territory.

The article has four parts. First, we take a brief look at the post-revolutionary political landscape in Libya that has allowed ASL to emerge and proliferate. Second, we examine the group's evolution, ideology and strategy. Third, we take a closer look at the group's violent activities. Finally, we discuss what the group's background and activities tell us about the type of threat it poses, before we conclude with a brief assessment of what could be expected from ASL in the future.

Libya's Post-Revolutionary Political Landscape

Libya's turbulent post-revolutionary political landscape provides the backdrop for the emergence of ASL, and has been a *sine qua non* for the group's ability to operate openly in the country. The overthrow of Muammar al-Gaddafi in 2011 created a security vacuum in Libya, which made it possible for local militias to carve out fiefdoms largely outside the control of the country's interim government in Tripoli. Since then no governing authority has managed to take control over Libya and establish a monopoly of violence in the country. Instead, rivalling militias with often incompatible agendas have solidified their position as the effective power-holders. This has led to an impasse, where Libyan politics has been held hostage by an ongoing struggle between a multitude of actors including Islamists, jihadis, nationalists, revolutionaries, counterrevolutionaries and ethnic minorities for influence over Libya's future.[3]

After 2012, the security situation in Libya began to deteriorate rapidly. However, a full-scale civil war did not break out until General Khalifa Haftar, a former Libyan officer who had defected in 1987 during Libya's war with Chad,[4] launched Operation Dignity in May 2014. Although the initial crux of Haftar's campaign was focused on Benghazi [5], he quickly extended his operations to other parts of Libya, targeting not only hard-line jihadis such as those from ASL, but also Islamists of a more moderate bent.[6] At that time, a bloc comprised of mainly revolutionaries from the city of Misrata and different Islamist parties dominated the General National Congress (GNC), Libya's interim government. On 18 May 2014, Operation Dignity-aligned forces stormed the parliament in Tripoli and forced GNC to call new elections. The elections turned out to be a disaster for the Misrata-Islamist bloc, which lost its majority in the new parliament.

In response to the political developments and the prospect of Operation Dignity forces taking control of the country, Misratan militias and several Islamist militant groups formed a coalition known as Libya Dawn. The new coalition launched an attack on Tripoli in July 2014 and expelled the Operation Dignity forces from the city. Libya Dawn then took steps to secure political control over Tripolitania, the western part of the country. GNC had been legally dissolved after the elections and ceded its powers to the House of Representatives (HoR), which would function as Libya's new legislative assembly. However, Libya Dawn forced HoR to flee the capital and reconvened the defunct GNC, which would subsequently function as the political wing of Libya Dawn. HoR meanwhile established itself in the eastern city of Tubruq and gradually aligned itself more openly with Haftar, leaving Libya with two rival governments; one located in the west, under the control of Libya Dawn, and the other in the east loyal to Haftar.[7]

Efforts were made over the next year and a half to end the standoff between the two sides and work towards political unity. This work culminated, on 17 December 2015, with the signing of the UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), which announced the Government of National Accord (GNA) as the new unity government of Libya. GNA moved to Tripoli and assumed government functions in late March 2016, and GNC subsequently agreed to disband. However, Haftar and HoR refused to recognize GNA's legitimacy.[8] In October 2016, former members of GNC loyal to Libya's Grand Mufti Sadiq al-Ghariani, who is the spiritual leader of several hard-line Islamist and jihadi groups in the country,[9] made the situation in Libya even more complex by attempting a coup against GNA. This has left the country with three rival governments each dominated by different militias and this situation has severely weakened the UN-brokered peace process.[10]

Before discussing what the broader context of the Libyan conflict entails for ASL and the type of threat the group will pose in the future, we take a closer look at the group's evolution and violent activities in the next two sections.

Ansar al-Sharia in Libya: Evolution, Ideology and Strategy

ASL arose from cooperation between two groups, the Ansar al-Sharia Brigade in Benghazi (ASB) and Ansar al-Sharia in Derna (ASD). ASB, which was the more prominent of the two groups, was established by

Muhammad al-Zahawi in Benghazi in February 2012, whereas ASD was founded by Abu Sufian bin Qumu, a former Guantanamo inmate, in Derna.[11]

The attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi in September 2012 was a major turning point for ASB and ASD. Although they have not claimed responsibility, the groups are believed to be responsible for the attack, which Ahmed Abu Khattala, a commander of ASB, is alleged to have planned.[12] As mentioned above, the attack brought ASB and ASD into the international spotlight for the first time, and it was crucial in the groups' designation as terrorist organisations by the U.S. State Department and the U.N. in 2014.[13] The attack also had great impact on ASB and ASD's reputation on the domestic scene and served as a catalyst for anger against the two groups. Massive protests erupted against them in the weeks following the attack, forcing them to withdraw from their bases in Benghazi and Derna.[14]

Yet this was merely a temporary setback. Following these events, ASB's leader al-Zahawi initiated a rebranding effort that sought to rehabilitate Ansar al-Sharia in the eyes of the public. The group began to focus more on charity work to alter public perceptions. It also renamed itself Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL), excluding 'brigade' from its name to convey that it was not mainly an armed group while simultaneously giving the impression that it was a national movement [15], although it only had a presence in Benghazi and (probably) Derna at the time.[16]

Exploiting the chaotic political and security situation in Libya, ASL then managed to build up its strength, particularly in Benghazi, and subsequently it proceeded to establish branches in new cities, including Nawfalia, Sirte and Ajdabiya.[17] The group is also known to have had cells operating in some other cities in Libya, such as al-Bayda,[18] Sabratha,[19] and Tripoli.[20]

As for ASL's ideology, it can be characterized as Salafi-jihadi. The group follows a strict interpretation of Islam, believes in the permissibility of declaring *takfir* (the act of condemning someone as an unbeliever) against Muslims who do not agree with its interpretation of Islam, and emphasises the need to purge the *umma* (Islamic community) of *kufir* (unbelief).[21] ASL's primary goal is to establish an Islamic state in Libya with Sharia as the sole source of legislation and the group has on several occasions made it clear that the only way to achieve this is through violent jihad.[22] Importantly, and unlike many other Islamist militant groups and political parties operating in Libya, ASL has from the outset unambiguously disavowed democracy, considering it antithetical to Islam. As Zelin notes, ASL also has "a global dimension and is very much within the ideological milieu of global jihadism." [23] The group has, for instance, on several occasions echoed al-Qaida's claims that the U.S. is Islam's greatest enemy and that the "War on Terror" is in its essence a war on all Muslims.[24]

ASL's leadership has denied having any links to al-Qaida or other militant groups outside Libya,[25] but there is much evidence to the contrary. In addition to sharing much of al-Qaida's ideological outlook, ASL has repeatedly referred to, and expressed support for, al-Qaida ideologues and personalities in its propaganda and public statements.[26] Several high-ranking figures in ASL are known to have been in contact with al-Qaida before joining ASL. Shortly after the death of ASL leader al-Zahawi in January 2015, a senior al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) official published an eulogy for him, disclosing that al-Zahawi had met with Osama bin Laden in Sudan in the 1990s and that he followed Bin Laden's "methodology".[27] In fact, ASL's refusal to recognize its ties to al-Qaida seems to be in line with the latter's "clandestine strategy for building up its presence inside Libya,"[28] whereby al-Qaida affiliated groups operate under different names than al-Qaida in order to avoid attracting international attention and alienating the local population.

Furthermore, there is also evidence of contact and cooperation between al-Qaida, especially its regional affiliate al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and ASL on the ground in Libya. Both AQAP and AQIM members are known to have participated in the attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi.[29] Non-Libyan al-Qaida members have also fought alongside ASL against Haftar's Operation Dignity, for example the Algerian

Mohammad Abu Azzah who was killed in Benghazi in 2014.[30] Moreover, ASL has operated training camps inside its territory, where individuals linked to al-Qaida and affiliated groups have received training before carrying out attacks abroad. For instance, twelve of the 24 individuals involved in the In Amenas attacks in 2013 had trained in ASL camps in Benghazi, according to a UN report.[31] There is also evidence that ASL has operated camps within their territory in Benghazi in which foreign jihadis have received training before going to Syria.[32]

While ASL clearly seems to be part of al-Qaida's network in Libya, it has not released any official propaganda threatening to carry out attacks in Western countries. Instead, ASL's activities have mainly focused on Libya and its main goal in the short- and medium-term perspective has been to establish a durable presence and a local support base in the country. In order to garner popular support, it has attempted to appear as a positive force in society by portraying itself as a guarantor of security and provider of social welfare while somewhat downplaying its violent underpinnings. In so doing, it represents a trend where groups associated with al-Qaida have become increasingly focused on portraying a more humane and moderate version of Salafi-jihadism.[33] ASL's efforts to gain popularity, commonly referred to as *da'wa* (proselytizing) campaigns have taken a variety of forms, including provision of aid to the poor, cleaning of roads and public places, and providing security to local hospitals, as well as religious teaching and spreading of ASL's particular understanding of Islam.[34] Although it is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of ASL's *da'wa* activities, there are some signs suggesting that they have enabled the group to build up a significantly large degree of popular support in some areas. For instance, in 2014, *Libya Herald* estimated that ASL had between 45,000 – 50,000 supporters in and around Benghazi alone.[35]

Ansar al-Sharia After Operation Dignity

After Haftar launched Operation Dignity in May 2014, ASL has been forced to focus the bulk of its efforts on military activity, and it has therefore been unable to keep the *da'wa* campaigns at the same level. In fact, it is unclear whether or not the group has the capacity to organize *da'wa* in any meaningful way as of the time of this writing (late 2016). While ASL's propaganda from mid-2014 onwards reflects the changes on the ground in Libya in the sense that it has focused on the war against Haftar, there is also continuity in the group's communication strategy. It has continued to push the narrative that ASL is a positive force in society by framing Haftar as an enemy of the Libyan revolution, and a war criminal targeting innocent civilians, while portraying ASL as the defenders of the civilian population and the revolution.[36]

Another change in ASL's modus operandi after Operation Dignity is its involvement in coalitions, known as "Shura Councils", with other Islamist and jihadi groups in its major centres of influence, including Benghazi, Ajdabiya and Derna. As noted previously, Haftar's campaign targeted Islamists of all stripes, without distinguishing between hard-line jihadi groups and more moderate Islamists. The shared threat from Haftar appears to have united these groups, and at first they achieved considerable success on the battlefield, prompting ASL's now-deceased leader al-Zahawi to declare Benghazi an Islamic emirate on 30 July 2014.[37] However, ASL and its coalition partners have suffered significant setbacks since then. Previously, ASL had a significant presence in several cities, but today it would appear that its presence is mostly confined to Derna and Benghazi, where Haftar has conquered the entire city except from the south-western district of Ganfuda and the Sabri and Souq al-Hout areas in the centre of Benghazi.[38]

ASL is part of the Benghazi Revolutionaries' Shura Council (BRSC), which comprises most of the major Islamist militias in Benghazi, including Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups such as Libya Shield 1 and the February 17th Martyrs Brigade, the Raf Allah al-Sahati Brigade, as well as some smaller groups.[39] Although there is little information about the way in which BRSC is organized, several factors suggest that ASL is the dominant group in the coalition. It has frequently been referred to as such in local media,[40] and the fact that ASL leader al-Zahawi was BRSC's first leader gives further indication of this.[41] ASL's relative

strength vis-à-vis the other groups in Benghazi is also revealed by the fact that they appear to have adopted some of ASL's more extreme ideological positions, and that BRSC's political platform in large part reflects ASL's ideology.[42] A case in point is BRSC's 19th communiqué, which is clearly more aligned with ASL's ideology than with the Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups in the coalition. It states that BRSC does not approve of democracy or political parties, neither secular nor Islamist.[43] In Derna, however, ASL appears to have played a less prominent role in the local Shura Council called the Mujahidin Shura Council of Derna and Its Suburbs (MSCDS), where another al-Qaida-linked group, the Abu Salim Martyrs' Brigade,[44] has been named the dominant group. Although ASL's first leader in Derna, Sufian bin Qumu, was a former military commander in MSCDS,[45] for the most part ASL seems to have operated independently from this Council since June 2015. At that time, fighting broke out between MSCDS and IS, and, according to Eljarh, ASL has decided to remain neutral in this conflict. [46]

Whereas ASL has retained its separate identity in Derna, it has become increasingly indistinguishable from BRSC in Benghazi. The group appears to have made a conscious decision to frame the bulk of its activities through BRSC. One reason behind this could be that BRSC, to a lesser extent than ASL, has had its brand tainted by association with terrorism. Unlike ASL, BRSC has not been designated a terrorist organisation by the UN, and the other groups operating within the coalition probably allows BRSC to appear less extreme than ASL itself. If ASL has aimed, as previously suggested, to present a more acceptable face of Salafi-jihadism to the public, the group's decision to feature itself through BRSC would appear to be a natural extension of the same line of thinking.

While ASL's involvement in "Shura Councils" allowed for forging closer ties with more moderate groups, it also made the group vulnerable to the ideological challenge represented by IS. A case in point is the 11th issue of Dabiq, where IS' now deceased leader in Libya, Abu al-Mughira al-Qahtani, attacked ASL's jihadi credentials by criticizing the group for uniting with "revolutionary movements linked to the apostate regime of Tarabulus," referring to the GNC government in Tripoli and Libya Dawn.[47] While ASL quickly published a rebuttal of this claim,[48] another statement published by BRSC shortly afterwards shows that ASL and BRSC indeed have cooperated with Libya Dawn.[49] Coupled with the strong ideological pull of IS following its declaration of a "Caliphate" in June 2014, ASL's ties to more moderate Islamists have lost the group numerous members to IS, including its entire branch in Sirte in 2015.[50] However, ASL appears not to have suffered further larger-scale defections to IS since then. In fact, it seems that IS' allure for Libyan jihadis might have decreased as the group's fortunes have fallen in Libya, Syria and Iraq. For instance, more than three hundred IS fighters are reported to have joined ASL in Derna after MSCDS managed to expel IS from the city.[51] In the near future, more IS fighters might calculate that it is better to defect to ASL, due to IS' recent setbacks in Sirte.

All of this suggests that ASL, at least for the time being, has managed to endure the challenges that it has faced since Haftar launched Operation Dignity in 2014, as well as dealing with the ideological challenge from IS. Although ASL has suffered considerable setbacks, having its presence reduced to Derna and Benghazi, the group and its coalition partners might still represent the strongest jihadi faction in Libya[52], particularly after IS' defeat in Sirte in late 2016. While the group is part of al-Qaida's network and has shown great enmity towards Western countries, it has mainly had a local focus. As we shall see, this has also been reflected in the group's violent activities.

Ansar al-Sharia's Violent Activities

In order to establish the key features of ASL's violent activities, we compiled a dataset of attacks carried out by the group from the attack on the American Consulate in Benghazi on 11 September 2012 until 15 July 2016.[53] We have also included attacks carried out by BRSC, because ASL has become increasingly indistinguishable from BRSC in Benghazi. Attacks attributed to other Shura Councils, such as the one in

Derna, have not been included in the dataset. The decision not to include these incidents comes down to the fact that unlike in BRSC, ASL has not formed the dominant group in other coalitions.[54]

The data is collected from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), and Libya Body Count, which is a database of violent deaths in Libya since the beginning of 2014. The data given in these databases has been corroborated and supplemented with reports from local media, primarily *al-Wasat* and *Libya Herald*, international media outlets, and, in some cases, social media content published by ASL and BRSC.

While GTD, UCDP and Libya Body Count provided a useful starting point for collecting data, they have certain limitations. Neither GTD nor UCDP rely on Arabic sources, which limits the scope and accuracy of both databases to some extent. Both UCDP and Libya Body Count only list incidents in which at least one person has been killed, whereas GTD only includes attacks if they fit, at least partially, into its definition of terrorist attacks.[55] This excludes many of ASL's attacks, giving a less accurate picture of how the group operates. We therefore believe that our dataset, which combines output from these three databases, and supplements with local Arabic-language media, provides a better reference for understanding and analysing ASL's violent activity.

Limitations

Despite our best efforts to compensate for the respective weaknesses of the databases we have collected from, our dataset is hardly immune to inaccuracies. It is solely based on open sources and the actual number of attacks carried out by ASL might therefore be higher than what we have recorded. Due to the complex situation on the ground in Libya, it is often difficult to conclusively establish whether ASL or another group carried out a given attack. With the exception of certain high-profile operations, ASL and BRSC rarely claim responsibility for attacks. One will therefore necessarily operate with some degree of uncertainty when attributing a given incident to ASL or another group. For this reason, the dataset presents a conservative estimate of ASL's activity, meaning that attacks are usually not included unless ASL or BRSC have been specifically mentioned in the sources.

The picture is also complicated by the fact that IS and ASL have cooperated against Haftar in Benghazi, where the majority of attacks that might be attributed to ASL have been carried out. Particularly since late 2015, it has been difficult to distinguish between ASL/BRSC and IS in clashes with Operation Dignity forces in Benghazi. The local media commonly mention both groups, or refer to "Islamist militants" without specifying further when describing these incidents. While the dataset includes these instances, it lists the perpetrators of these attacks as "Islamist militants" to ensure the utmost degree of clarity possible.

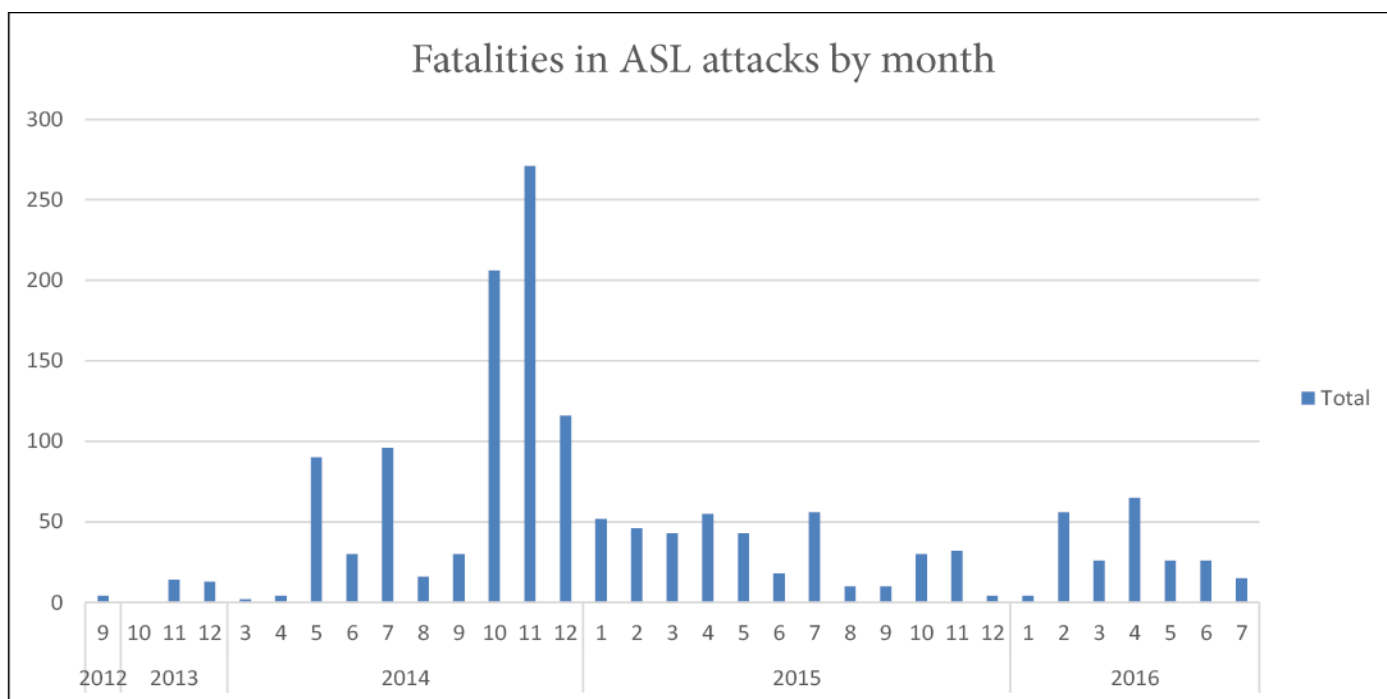
Overall Findings

The dataset includes 329 incidents, which vary significantly in scope. Whereas some incidents are only minor attacks with no reported casualties, others include heavy clashes between ASL and Operation Dignity forces often lasting several days. In total, we have registered 1,509 fatalities in attacks carried out by ASL in the period covered. However, the actual number could be higher, as some deaths might not have been reported due to the chaotic situation in Libya.

The first attack that can be attributed to ASL is the 11 September 2012 attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi (see Figure 1). After this initial high-profile attack, there was a 13-month hiatus in ASL's violent activities, where virtually no attack has been attributed to the group.[56] From October 2013, ASL again started carrying out occasional attacks, targeting both civilians and soldiers. The first spike in attacks and casualty figures occurred in May 2014 with the beginning of Operation Dignity, when 90 people were

killed in ASL attacks. Operation Dignity’s second major assault on Benghazi from October – December 2014 is the deadliest period by far with almost 600 reported dead in ASL/BRSC attacks, which accounts for approximately 40% of fatalities in the entire period. The number of monthly fatalities from January 2015 onwards remained fairly consistent, with an average of 33 people killed each month. A notable spike is seen in April 2016 (65 fatalities), while August and September 2015 (10 fatalities each month) and December 2015 – January 2016 (4 fatalities each month) show periods with comparatively few deadly attacks.

Figure 1: *Fatalities in ASL attacks, by month*

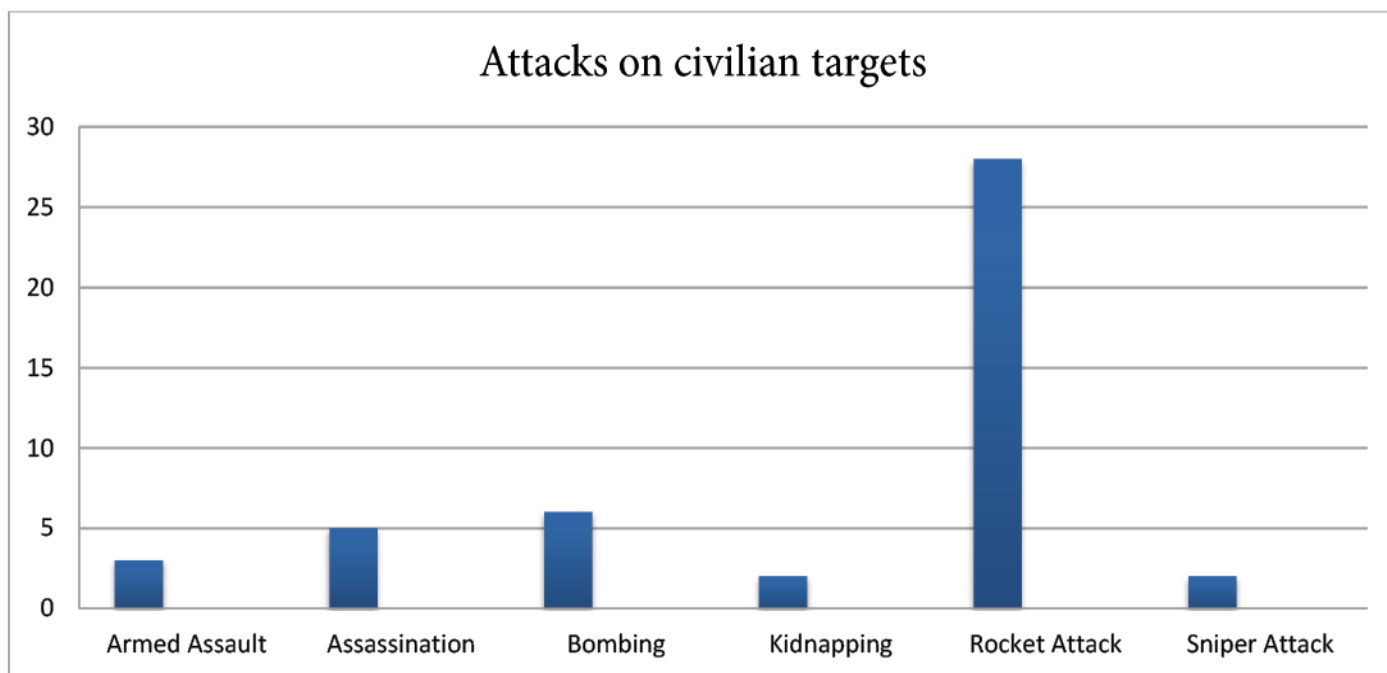


The majority of attacks were directed against military targets (86%), and these attacks also account for the vast majority of fatalities (92%). Most of these casualties come from what we describe as “Regular Clashes”. The sources usually do not give detailed descriptions of weapons used in these incidents, but the material we have suggests that most of these attacks are carried out with various types of small arms, often supported with sniper rifles and rocket launchers. 2016 saw a rise in the number of soldiers killed in landmine and IED explosions. BRSC allegedly employed tanks for the first time in an attack on 1 January 2015, but there have been no subsequent reports about ASL’s or BRSC’s use of tanks. ASL reportedly shot down three Libyan fighter jets in January and February 2016, which suggests that the group has acquired sophisticated ground-to-air weaponry; analysts have reported that the group has portable missile launchers of the MANPADS type in its possession. [57] A total of ten suicide attacks have been attributed to ASL or BRSC from 2013 to 2016, three of which they have claimed responsibility for. All suicide attacks have been against military targets, but civilian bystanders have been killed in some of them. The attacks have all been carried out with explosive-laden vehicles that have been rammed into military bases or checkpoints. There are no examples of suicide attacks being carried out with explosive vests or similar devices.

As for attacks on civilians, the clear majority have targeted individuals that ASL considered its political rivals, such as supporters of Haftar and other Salafis. More than half of the attacks on civilians were rocket attacks (61%, see Figure 2) [58], and these also counted for the largest amount of total civilian fatalities (approximately 70%). Most of these rocket attacks seem to have been retaliatory attacks against pro-Haftar neighbourhoods in Benghazi and the majority of them have been carried out when ASL has been under significant pressure by Haftar’s forces. [59] There are five reported cases of assassinations with civilian targets, but the real number is likely to be higher. Because groups in Libya seldom claim responsibility for

assassinations, it is difficult to prove whether ASL or another group carried them out. Numerous other assassinations have been carried out in the same period, [60] which have not been included in the dataset due to the fact that ASL has not been explicitly named in connection with these attacks in our source material. It should also be noted that there are no examples of ASL claiming responsibility for attacks targeting civilians. The fact that ASL attacks mainly target military personnel and seemingly try to avoid being associated with attacks against civilians supports our previous claim that the group seeks to portray itself as a protector of the civilian population.

Figure 2: *Attacks on Civilian Targets*



All of ASL’s attacks were carried out in Libya and the overwhelming majority have targeted Libyan nationals, during the period under consideration. However, attacks against foreign civilians and diplomatic missions feature prominently from September 2012 – May 2014. Although the overall frequency of attacks in this period is very low compared to subsequent periods, it is noteworthy that four out of twelve ASL attacks recorded until May 2014 were directed against foreign nationals and that three of these four attacks targeted Western citizens. This number does not necessarily show the whole picture, as there were several attacks on diplomatic missions in Benghazi prior to the 11 September attack on the U.S. Consulate.[61] While it is not unlikely that ASL carried out, or participated in these attacks, they have not been included in the dataset due to the lack of explicit mention of the group in the source material.

We now turn to a brief discussion of what kind of threat ASL poses, based upon its background, stated goals and violent activities. We then conclude with an attempt at forecasting what might be expected from ASL in the future.

Ansar al-Sharia: An Enduring Threat

The extent to which ASL will pose a threat in the future depends on its ability to operate openly and use areas in Libya as a safe haven. As described above, the group has been significantly weakened since declaring an Islamic emirate in Benghazi in mid-2014. However, ASL still has a presence in Benghazi and Derna, and two factors in particular suggest that the group and its coalition partners will continue to be a force to be reckoned with in Libya for the foreseeable future.

First, the political instability in post-revolutionary Libya has been crucial for ASL's survival and ability to prosper, and the prospects for bringing an end to the turmoil look bleak. Libya remains politically divided between three rival governments and the leaders of the largest militias, the real power-holders in the country, are actively undermining the UN-brokered political process aimed at bringing an end to the conflict. Haftar appears determined to continue his military campaign until he has seized control of the entire country,[62] while the Grand Mufti al-Ghariani, the spiritual leader of many of the Islamist and jihadi groups in Libya, continues to incite his followers to reject the UN-brokered process through his *fatwas* (religious rulings).[63]

Second, ASL has been able to develop ever-closer ties to other Islamist and jihadi groups in Libya after Haftar launched Operation Dignity in May 2014. Through its involvement in Shura Councils, ASL has to a large extent managed to integrate itself into the wider Islamist movement that opposes Haftar's campaign to seize control of the entire country. In Benghazi, for instance, ASL and BRSC have become virtually indistinguishable. Even if Haftar's Operation Dignity forces were able to expel ASL from both Benghazi and Derna, this would probably not mean an end to the group's activities. With support from its Islamist and jihadi allies, ASL can probably easily relocate to other areas in Libya and carry on the fight from there. In fact, some fighters from ASL and its coalition partners in BRSC already appear to have relocated to al-Jufra, a district in central Libya. On 2 June 2016, Islamist and jihadi fighters from both Western Libya and Benghazi and its surrounding areas announced the formation of a new coalition group called the Defend Benghazi Brigades and declared their support for BRSC.[64]

First and Foremost a Local and Regional Threat

For now, ASL must clearly be seen as more of a local and regional threat than a global one. The group has neither carried out attacks outside of Libya, nor has it (or any of the coalition groups it is part of) released any official propaganda output in which it explicitly threatens to do so. When it comes to the threat that ASL poses locally, the group has clearly demonstrated its intentions to impede any political process that could bring a peaceful solution to the crisis in Libya. The group vehemently rejects democracy as a legitimate form of government and has explicitly stated on several occasions that it will not lay down its weapons before "a true Islamic state" is established in Libya. While ASL does not have the same manpower as (for instance) Haftar, the group's intentions to act as a spoiler in Libya should not be taken lightly. The fact that Haftar's numerically superior forces have thus far failed to take all of Benghazi, despite having claimed that victory was imminent on numerous occasions since 2014,[65] indicates that ASL and its allies indeed wield significant fighting power.

ASL's main goal has been to establish a durable presence in Libya by winning over the local population. Since its inception in 2012, the group has sought to portray itself as a positive force in society by putting emphasis on its role as a protector of the civilian population and by downplaying its role as a terrorist organisation and the ties to al-Qaida. The group's focus on garnering popular support is to a large extent reflected in its violent activities, as it has mainly targeted military personnel and refrained from carrying out large-scale attacks on civilians in order to avoid alienating the local population. However, a worrying trend is that ASL has increasingly resorted to indiscriminate attacks against civilians living in areas controlled by Haftar's forces when under significant pressure, which suggests that ASL might carry out more such attacks in the near future. The group has also not shied away from politically motivated assassinations of civilians, showing that it is prepared to use violence against civilians when it is in its interests.

Although ASL has not carried out any attacks outside of Libya, the group clearly poses a threat to Western interests. As mentioned earlier, it has carried out at least three attacks against Western civilians and diplomatic missions in Libya since 2012. While ASL has not carried out any such attacks since the beginning of 2014 [66], this does not indicate that the group is no longer interested in striking Western targets. The reason why there have not been more such attacks is related to changes on the ground in Libya, and probably

comes down to the following factors: after 2014 most foreign diplomats were pulled out of Libya due to the worsening of the security situation in the country.[67] In addition, and perhaps most importantly, the fight against Haftar's Operation Dignity has taken precedence the last couple of years. Furthermore, the fact that previous attacks on Western diplomats, such as the one on the U.S. consulate in 2012, have caused a public backlash against ASL might also be part of the explanation why the group has not carried out more such attacks.[68]

Lately, however, there have been signs that ASL and its coalition partners might develop a growing interest in Western targets. In June 2016, France caused a public outcry in Libya, particularly among Islamists, when it confirmed having a military presence in the country after three French soldiers had been killed in a helicopter crash.[69] Subsequently, several Islamists and jihadis including BRSC and the Grand Mufti al-Ghariani issued statements denouncing the French and portraying their presence as an act of war against the Libyan people, as well as asserting their commitment to repel any foreign aggression against the country.[70] More worrisome than this response is that the French involvement seems to have fuelled the sentiment that the West is at war with the Libyan people, and made it more widespread. If this trend continues, groups such as ASL might calculate that the public backlash from carrying out terrorist attacks against Western interests is going to be less severe, thereby increasing the probability of such attacks. Some pro-ASL and BRSC accounts on social media have even called upon Muslims to carry out retaliatory attacks in France.[71] However, the significance of these calls should not be overestimated. They remain calls addressed to potential sympathizers and do not signify that ASL has committed resources to carry out attacks in France.

The most significant threat from ASL to the international community beyond Libya's borders probably stems from its close ties to al-Qaida and the training camps ASL is operating.[72] For the time being, the group's training camps mainly pose a regional threat. Most of the individuals who have trained at these camps have been linked to North African al-Qaida groups, such as AQIM. These groups have prioritized regional operations, and, until now, they have not carried out attacks in Western countries. However, they have targeted Western interests in North Africa. Moreover, they have threatened to carry out operations in the West on numerous occasions.[73] It is therefore not inconceivable that individuals who have trained in ASL's training camps might participate in attacks in Western—and particularly European—countries in the future.

As for their capability to operate in Europe, al-Qaida linked groups in North Africa can draw upon several networks of sympathizers on the continent. Since the mid-1990s, Algerian networks that have had close ties to AQIM (and its predecessor GSPC) have been at the heart of jihadi activities in Europe.[74] If AQIM and ASL, for instance, decide to expand their operational area to Europe, they would therefore likely have the capability to do so.

Conclusion

This analysis suggests that ASL will remain a significant threat for the foreseeable future. By cooperating with other Islamists and jihadis, the group has managed to endure the setbacks it has experienced since Haftar launched Operation Dignity in May 2014. Although ASL has lost most of the territory it once controlled, it still has a presence in both Derna and Benghazi. Even if Haftar's forces manage to expel ASL from these two cities, this would probably not be a deathblow to the group. Unless the unlikely scenario occurs that the major militias agree on a political solution that would bring an end to the turmoil in Libya, ASL can easily relocate to other areas of the country and carry on the fight from there, with support from Islamist and jihadi allies. However, if ASL is forced to relocate to other areas, it is not certain that the group will continue to operate under its current name. A more probable outcome is that ASL will choose to frame the bulk of its activities through different coalition groups, as in Benghazi, to avoid attracting international attention.

As for the nature of the threat that ASL poses, it appears to be more of a local and regional hazard than a global one. The group has neither carried out any attacks outside of Libya, nor has it released any official propaganda output threatening to do so. However, ASL still poses a threat to Western interests, as it has attacked Western targets in Libya, is closely linked to al-Qaida, and operates training camps for international jihadis within Libya.

Over the last couple of years, anti-Western sentiments have become more widespread in Libya, due to Western military involvement in the country. These sentiments reached new heights after France was forced to admit a military presence in the country. Although ASL and its coalition partners have most likely not committed any resources to carry out attacks in Western countries, this could surely change in the future. Coupled with the regional threat that ASL poses both to local and Western interests, it is therefore clear that containing the threat from the group and the wider al-Qaida-network in Libya should remain a priority for the Western counterterrorism community.

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Notes

[1] See, for instance, Geoff D. Porter, 'How Realistic Is Libya as an Islamic State "Fallback"?', *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 3 (March 2016); URL: https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/CTC-SENTINEL-Vol9Iss3_b2.pdf; Andrew Engel, 'Defeating the Islamic State in Sirte: Secondary Effects and Remaining Challenges', *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 8 July 2016; URL: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/defeating-the-islamic-state-in-sirte-secondary-effects-and-remaining-challe>; Ben Hubbard, Eric Schmitt, and David D. Kirkpatrick, 'ISIS' Grip on Libyan City Gives It a Fallback Option', *The New York Times*, 28 November 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/world/middleeast/isis-grip-on-libyan-city-gives-it-a-fallback-option.html>; Frederic Wehrey, 'Libyans Are Winning the Battle Against the Islamic State', *Foreign Policy*, 30 June 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/30/libyans-are-winning-the-battle-against-the-islamic-state/>.

[2] See, for instance, Thomas Joscelyn, 'Libya's Terrorist Descent: Causes and Solutions', *The Long War Journal*, 27 September 2016; URL: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/libyas-terrorist-descent-causes-and-solutions.php>; Thomas Joscelyn, 'Ansar Al Sharia Libya Fights on under New Leader', *The Long War Journal*, 30 June 2015; URL: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/06/ansar-al-sharia-libya-fights-on-under-new-leader.php>. Both Joscelyn and Aaron Y. Zelin's blogposts on respectively *The Long War Journal* and *Jihadology* have provided us with many of the sources used in this article and we would like to thank them for that.

[3] For more information about the post-revolutionary context in Libya and the key actors in this struggle, see for instance: Mikael Eriksson, 'A Fratricidal Libya: Making Sense of a Conflict Complex', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (2 September 2016): 817–36, doi:10.1080/09592318.2016.1208794; Hanspeter Mattes, 'Libya since 2011: Political Transformation and Violence', *Middle East Policy* 23, no. 2 (1 June 2016): 59–75; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, 'Dignity and Dawn: Libya's Escalating Civil War' (The Hague: The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, February 2015); URL: <https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Gartenstein-Ross-Barr-Dignity-and-Dawn-Libyas-Escalating-Civil-War-February2015.pdf>.

[4] Jon Lee Anderson, 'Libya's New Strongman', *The New Yorker*, 23 February 2015; URL: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/23/unravelling>.

[5] The stated aim of Operation Dignity was initially to break ASL and other Islamist and jihadi militias' hold over Benghazi. See 'Haftar Launches Benghazi Attack on Islamists', *Libya Herald*, 16 May 2014; URL: <https://www.libyaherald.com/2014/05/16/haftar-launches-benghazi-attack-on-islamists/.%E2%80%98>.

[6] Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, 'Dignity and Dawn: Libya's Escalating Civil War', 25.

[7] For more information about Operation Dignity and Libya Dawn and the conflict between them, see Gartenstein-Ross and Barr, 'Dignity and Dawn: Libya's Escalating Civil War'.

[8] 'Haftar, the Strongman Who Seems Himself as Libya's Saviour', *Al-Monitor*, 12 September 2016; URL: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2016/09/libya-conflict-politics-army-haftar.html>.

[9] See, for instance, Majlis Shurā Mujāhidi Darna, 'Mithāq Darna', 22 August 2016; Sarāyā al-Difā' An Banghāzi, 'Bayān 9', 16 August 2016.

[10] Rhiannon Smith and Jason Pack, "'Coup" Attempt Could Complicate Libya's Fight Against ISIS', *Tony Blair Faith Foundation*, 24 October 2016; URL: <http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/coup-attempt-could-complicate-libyas-fight-against-isis>; Libya Analysis, Jason Pack *AJE Libya Political Process*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSEQOzDRppE>.

[11] At the time there were also other Libyan groups using a variation of the Ansar al-Sharia name. See Aaron Y. Zelin, 'Know Your Ansar Al-Sharia', *Foreign Policy*, 21 September 2012; URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/21/know-your-ansar-al-sharia/>.

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- [15] For more information about this rebranding process see Aaron Y. Zelin, 'Libya's Jihadists beyond Benghazi', *Foreign Policy*, 12 August 2013; URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/12/libyas-jihadists-beyond-benghazi/>; Mohamed Eljarh, 'Ansar Al-Sharia Returns to Benghazi', *Foreign Policy*, 8 March 2013; URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/08/ansar-al-sharia-returns-to-benghazi/>.
- [16] ASL's presence in Derna in late 2012 and early 2013 is difficult to gauge. Some media sources claim that the Ansar al-Sharia branch in Derna had disbanded after the protests in September 2012, suggesting that ASL did not have a presence in the city during this time period. See, for instance, 'Militia Groups in Eastern Libyan City "to Disband"', 'All Benghazi Militia to Be Put under National Army Control, Others to Be Disbanded'. However, it is more likely that ASL managed to have at least a clandestine presence in the city.
- [17] Zelin, 'Libya's Jihadists beyond Benghazi'; Andrew Engel, 'Libya's Civil War' (The Washington Institute For Near East Policy, April 2015); URL: http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote25_Engel4.pdf.
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- [20] Aaron Y. Zelin, 'The Rise and Decline of Ansar Al-Sharia in Libya', *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 18 (May 2015): 105.
- [21] Mu'assasat al-Rāya Lil-Intāj al-Īlāmiyy, 'Aqīda Wa-Manhaj', n.d.
- [22] See, for instance, Anṣār al-Sharī'a, 'Al-Radd Alā Mā Jā'a Min Mughālatāt Fī Maqāl Dābiq', 24 September 2015.
- [23] Zelin, 'The Rise and Decline of Ansar Al-Sharia in Libya', 110.
- [24] See, for instance, Shabakat al-Akhbār al-Libīyya, *Al-Sayyid Muḥammad Al-Zahāwī Yatlu Bayān*, 2014; URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21XbN2LWI4>; Mu'assasat al-Rāya Lil-Intāj al-Īlāmiyy, 'Bayān Hawl Asr Al-Akh (Abu Anas Al-Libīyy)', 8 October 2013.
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- [26] Thomas Joscelyn, 'Ansar Al Sharia Libya Relies on Al Qaeda Ideologues to Guide Followers', *The Long War Journal*, 2 February 2016; URL: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/02/ansar-al-sharia-libya-relies-on-al-qaeda-ideologues-to-guide-followers.php>.
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- [28] Thomas Joscelyn, 'Terrorism in Africa: The Imminent Threat to the United States', *The Long War Journal*, 29 April 2015; URL: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/04/terrorism-in-africa-the-imminent-threat-to-the-united-states.php>.
- [29] Thomas Joscelyn, 'Senate Report: Terrorists "affiliated" with Multiple Al Qaeda Groups Involved in Benghazi Attack', *The Long War Journal*, 15 January 2014; URL: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/01/intelligence_on_al.php.
- [30] 'Heavy Casualties as Benghazi Clashes Rage on', *Libya Herald*, 25 August 2014; URL: <https://www.libyaherald.com/2014/08/25/heavy-casualties-as-benghazi-clashes-rage-on/>.
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- [34] In addition to its local efforts, ASL launched a series of international da'wa campaigns from late 2012 to 2013, sending aid and da'wa literature to Gaza, Syria and Sudan. See Zelin, 'The Rise and Decline of Ansar Al-Sharia in Libya', 105–107.
- [35] 'Outbursts of Sporadic Violence as Benghazi Prepares Itself for Day of Armed Demonstrations', *Libya Herald*, 14 October 2014; URL: <https://www.libyaherald.com/2014/10/14/outbursts-of-sporadic-violence-as-benghazi-prepares-itself-for-day-of-armed-demonstrations/>.
- [36] Zelin, 'The Rise and Decline of Ansar Al-Sharia in Libya', 113; For an example of how this is done, see Markaz al-Sarāyā lil-Īlām, *Taqrīr Mar'īyy Yuwaththiq Mashāhid Min Majzarat Qanfuda Al-Thālitha*, 2016; URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sijHJzKtGN0>.
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- [40] 'Ghariani Tells Libyans to Join Fight against Hafter in Benghazi', *Libya Herald*, 9 March 2016; URL: <https://www.libyaherald.com/2016/03/09/ghariani-tells-libyans-to-join-fight-against-hafter-in-benghazi/>.

- [41] While difficult to verify, this is also supported by reports claiming that al-Zahawi's successor in Benghazi, Mukhtar Burezeiza, was BRSC leader until his (unconfirmed) death in the beginning of October 2016. See 'BRSC Statement Suggests Benghazi Ansar Leader May Be Dead', *Libya Herald*, 8 October 2016; URL: <https://www.libyaherald.com/2016/10/08/brsc-statement-suggests-benghazi-ansar-leader-may-be-dead/>.
- [42] Engel, 'Libya's Civil War', 6.
- [43] Majlis Shurā Thuwwār Banghāzi, 'Bayān 19', 24 August 2014, 19.
- [44] This group has mainly operated in Derna and its surrounding areas.
- [45] Zelin, 'The Rise and Decline of Ansar Al-Sharia in Libya'.
- [46] Mohamed Eljarh, 'Islamic State in Libya, Beyond Syria and Iraq (Washington: The Washington Institute For Near East Policy, 2016), 9; URL: http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus149_Bauer.pdf.
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- [50] Aaron Y. Zelin, 'The Islamic State's Burgeoning Capital in Sirte, Libya', *Policywatch* (The Washington Institute For Near East Policy, 6 August 2015); URL: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-burgeoning-capital-in-sirte-libya>.
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- [52] ASL does not release information on the number of fighters affiliated with the group and reliable estimates are difficult to obtain from other sources. The only estimate of ASL's fighters that we have seen was posted as an infographic on social media accounts and it put ASL's total number of fighters between four and five thousand. Although this number might give an indication of the group's strength, it should be treated with skepticism. See 'Ansar Al Sharia Libya', 14 October 2016; URL: <https://twitter.com/Jihadi/Threat/status/786902790123683841>.
- [53] The dataset can be found online at: <http://www.ffi.no/ansar-dataset>.
- [54] The only exception from this could be the Shura Council in Ajdabiya, where ASL might have been the leading faction in the coalition before it disbanded. See Engel, 'Libya's Civil War', 9. Nonetheless, we believe that our decision to omit Ajdabiya does not weaken our findings, as the number of attacks carried out by the Shura Council in Ajdabiya is very small. According to UCDP, for instance, it has only carried out one attack. See 'UCDP - Uppsala Conflict Data Program', n.d., <http://ucdp.uu.se/#/actor/6400>.
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- [57] 'Ansar Al-Shari'a in Libya Displays MANPADs', *Memri*, 22 May 2014; URL: <http://www.memrijtm.org/ansar-al-sharia-in-libya-displays-manpads.html>.
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- [66] Some sources have claimed that ASL was responsible for the kidnapping of the Italian doctor Ignazio Scaravilli in January 2015. See 'Kidnapped Italian Doctor Freed', *Libya Herald*, 10 June 2015; URL: <https://www.libyaherald.com/2015/06/10/kidnapped-italian-doctor-freed/#axzz3cs56eny>. However, more recent sources citing the GNC claim that Scaravilli was not kidnapped by ASL but arrested by local secret services. We have therefore chosen to not include this incident. See 'Scaravilli Back in Italy, Libyan Kidnapping Still a Mystery - Tripoli Sources, Not Kidnapped but Arrested by Our Intelligence', *ANSA*, 15 June 2015; URL: http://www.ansa.it/english/news/2015/06/15/scaravilli-back-in-italylibyan-kidnapping-still-a-mystery_bfbb50e7-ab0e-4b45-925d-352fedf25ddf.html.
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[71] See, for instance, Al-Sā'iqa Quddām, 'Wa-Innanā Min Banghāzī Nastanfīr Ikhwānanā Al-Muslimīn Fī Faransā An Yath'arū Li-Ikhwānihim Fī Libyā', 23 July 2016; URL: https://web.telegram.org/#/im?p=@SQ_BQ.

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[73] Andre Le Sage, 'The Evolving Threat of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb', *Strategic Forum* (Institute for National Strategic Studies, July 2011), 5.

[74] See, for instance, Petter Nesser, *Islamist Terrorism in Europe* (London: Hurst & Co, 2016), 67–86.s