

REGIONAL GUIDES TO LIFE AFTER ISLAMIC STATE

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TUNISIA

LIBYA

Tunisia is the North African state with the largest absolute and proportional representation of its nationals within the ranks of the Islamic State (IS). There are, it is claimed, some 7,000 Tunisians enrolled in the movement, compared with an estimated 1,500 Moroccans and between 100 to 200 Algerians.

During 2016, Islamic State (IS) was obliterated as a territorial force in Libya. IS fighters have scattered in small groups in remote desert areas, or gone underground as small cells in cities. They are unlikely to again attempt to openly establish control over cities or territory, since this will expose them to US or French airstrikes. They will also be unable to attract the large numbers of foreign fighters that had joined IS in its Libyan strongholds over 2015.

Many of the Tunisian recruits are located in Libya, despite the fact that Islamic State has been forced out of its stronghold in Sirte. Indeed, Libya is the ideal base, given its political chaos and the wide availability of arms from the stockpiles of the Qadhafi regime, freed up by the Libyan revolution in 2011. IS fighters have, as a result, been able to infiltrate Tunisia and launch the Ben Gardane (March 2016), Sousse (July 2015) and Bardo Museum (March 2015) attacks, as well as a devastating attack on the presidential guard in Tunis in December 2015.

Ansar al-Shari'a, and AQIM are similar. Moreover, violent extremist protest will persist because the conditions that generated it – poverty, unemployment, lack of political and cultural authenticity of existing regimes – will persist too.

Nor has a driver for the emergence of either IS or AQIM been the failure of a 'religious state infrastructure'. Both movements emerged in states that couldn't accommodate or suppress a challenge to their autocracy. Increased religion in the area emerged not because of greater religiosity but because it provided a culturally authentic rallying cry against the rhetoric of the state.

The quest for social and cultural authenticity has become more important as a driver for change than the more mundane but nonetheless real economic and security failures of the state itself.

This dynamic is aided by the tolerance previous regimes have shown for Salafism as an expression of the role of religion within social order. Its political role emerged only because of the parallel growth of Salafi-jihadism as an extremist version of the confrontation between state and social movement in the conquest for control of the state itself.

It is notable, too, that only Libya – an absolute autocracy – experienced a revolution, the implications of which are still unknown. By contrast, Tunisia evolved into democratic transition as a result of its previous status as a liberalised autocracy, as Algeria and Morocco had done so before.

The key to truly marginalising such movements is to ensure that moderate alternatives reflecting Islamic principle, such as the Ennahda movement, succeed.

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And that requires such movements to understand and play the political participatory game with appropriate external support whilst recognising that they cannot co-opt or cooperate with their extremist correlates.

That is a lesson that Ennahda in Tunisia and the Justice and Development Party in Morocco have already learned but their companion parties in Libya and Egypt have yet to realise.

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IS may continue to operate as a non-territorial force in Libya, both in remote areas and in cities. Foreign fighters dispersed from former Libyan IS strongholds may move into neighbouring countries, including their countries of origin – such as Tunisia, Niger or Sudan.

But in none of these countries will they find the environment that enabled IS to establish territorial control, as they did in Syria, Iraq and Libya during 2014-15.

IS elements will therefore revert to a more conventional existence as jihadist groups. Whether they do so under the IS label or as al-Qaeda affiliates is largely irrelevant.

The question, then, should be what the demise of IS as a territorial force and the change in wider conflict dynamics mean for Libya's jihadist movement more generally. Jihadism is established in Libya, and deeply implanted in the social fabric of specific cities.

Libyan IS affiliates were but the latest manifestation of Libyan jihadism, one born out of a particular set of

circumstances that do not exist anymore – IS expansion in Syria and Iraq; free movement between Libya and Syria via Libyan airports and Turkey; political and territorial divisions in Libya that opened up space for IS.

All the conditions are there for Libya's jihadist movements to remain virulently active after the demise of the caliphate.

The jihadist subculture that has developed in certain Libyan cities will sustain the flow of recruits to jihadist groups for a long time to come. In the best-case scenario, the state will remain weak; it could plausibly also remain absent from large swathes of the country.

Most importantly, ongoing conflicts continue to create opportunities for jihadist mobilisation, and lead political forces to strike tactical alliances with jihadists.

Across the country, societal tolerance for jihadist movements has drastically receded as a result of the confrontations with IS in Benghazi, Sirte and elsewhere.

This represents a significant change from the situation prevailing in 2012 and 2013, when the group Ansar al-Shari'a operated openly amid local society.

But the pendulum is now swinging towards the other extreme. An increasing range of political and military forces are adopting the discourse promoted by Egypt's al-Sisi and his Libyan acolyte General Khalifa Haftar.

This discourse fails to differentiate among strands of political Islam. In Benghazi, this approach led to a convergence of interests between non-ideological groups, Ansar al-Shari'a and IS. If it is applied to western Libya, it will push many Islamists there closer to jihadists. A US shift towards dealing with the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation would contribute to such a trend.

The most acute of current dangers is the eruption of open conflict in Western Libya as Haftar and his allies seek to advance in the region. A war in the greater Tripoli area would likely see jihadists there emerge as a leading force in an anti-Haftar coalition, much as it happened in Benghazi.

In Tripoli, such a war would likely last even longer and be much more destructive. It would provide a jihadist recruitment ground and fighting arena for many years to come. But a similar danger lurks in the potential eruption of conflict in south-western Libya as a result of an expansion of forces allied with Haftar.

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