Articles

Al-Qaida's Strategy in Libya: Keep it Local, Stupid

by Rhiannon Smith and Jason Pack

Abstract

This article looks at how al-Qaida-linked groups focus on the local struggle in Libya, how they have shaped their strategies and activities in the country, and what impact this has had on the communities where they are active. It explores how al-Qaida-linked groups have adapted their strategies differently in the eastern cities of Benghazi and Derna and draws out the main implications for Libya's future and the future of al-Qaida-linked groups in Libya. It argues that in Libya, al-Qaida-linked groups have done a better job than their ISIS-linked counterparts at staying rooted to local concerns, local actors, and evolving country dynamics, and that this has allowed them to mimic and replicate local and traditional power structures. The Libyan authorities' failure to delegitimize the underpinning ideology of al-Qaida-linked groups, the normalization of violence and extremism within society, and a pervasive zero-sum mentality have all contributed to the longevity of these groups. The core conclusion is that the rise of Salafi-jihadism in Libya is a symptom of broader, deeper governance problems and that without sustained, unified political and social efforts to address these problems, al-Qaida-linked groups will continue to maintain a presence in the country.

Keywords: Libya, Ansar al-Sharia, al-Qaida, Benghazi, Derna, Jihadism, Local

Introduction: Prioritisation of the Local over the Global

Throughout the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, al-Qaida positioned itself as a supporter of local movements across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, tapping into, and strengthening, relationships with local Salafi-jihadi leaders and seeking to insinuate itself into communities by quietly building its legitimacy through a focus on local issues and concerns.[1] Although the rhetoric of al-Qaida's senior leadership has continued to divide its attention fairly equally between the 'near enemy' (namely 'apostate' Middle Eastern regimes) and the 'far enemy' ('America' or 'the Crusaders') since the Arab Spring[2], in strategic terms it has allocated most of its resources to 'local' struggles.[3] This is in part due to the intense competition for followers, funding and ideological legitimacy which was sparked by the rise of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) from 2013 onwards.[4] The fluidity and constant mutability of jihadi groups means that as ISIS retreats following military defeats in Sirte, Mosul and Raqqa throughout late 2016 and 2017, it is likely that al-Qaida will actively seek to reclaim the mantle of jihadi leadership by absorbing remnant ISIS fighters and capitalizing on its local networks to reenergize its appeal and reach.[5] Given both ISIS and al-Qaida have a presence in Libya, the country provides an ideal case study through which to analyse how these global and regional dynamics are shaping the activities and strategy of al-Qaida-linked groups at a local level and what impact this might have on communities where they are active. In so doing, this article aims to contribute to existing literature on the increasingly 'glocal' or 'hybridised' strategy and ideology of Salafi-jihadi groups and to explore what impact this localised approach could have on the future shape and influence of the Salafi-jihadi movement, as well as strategies to counter it.[6]

The paper will first give a brief outline of al-Qaida's connections to Libya, then will consider how al-Qaida-linked groups have adapted their strategies differently in the eastern cities of Benghazi and Derna, before drawing out the main implications for Libya's future and the future of al-Qaida-linked groups in Libya. The two case studies show that these groups are incredibly flexible and can adapt to different human terrains and ideological narratives. In Libya, the dominant narratives centre on a fear of the unaccountable centralization of authority. Therefore, al-Qaida-linked groups have wisely tailored their narrative around that concern.[7] This article focuses on eastern Libya. It is outside its scope to cover the strategies of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb

(AQIM), which has a presence in southern Libya, or to consider other manifestations of the broader Salafi-jihadi movement in western Libya. Given the often nebulous connections between al-Qaida and its offshoots, 'al-Qaida' will refer to the central organization founded by Osama bin Laden and currently led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, along with official regional affiliates such as AQIM, while al-Qaida-linked groups will refer to Libyan groups that through their ideology, leadership or organizational structure have some links to al-Qaida. Salafi-jihadi will refer to anyone adhering to Salafi-jihadi ideology or practices, no matter what group or organization they are affiliated with.[8]

In Libya, al-Qaida-linked groups have done a better job than their ISIS-linked counterparts at staying rooted to local concerns, local actors, and evolving country dynamics, particularly given the latter's heavier reliance on foreign fighters and desire to assimilate to the global ISIS franchise which has led most Libyans to view ISIS unfavourably as a vehicle for foreign influence and intervention. Libya's connections to al-Qaida and global Salafi-jihadi networks stem from the so-called Libyan 'Afghan Arabs' who travelled to fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s, in many cases fighting for, or alongside, al-Qaida and its founders.[9] These connections have been renewed across subsequent generations and many of the powerful revolutionary militias that formed during the 2011 uprisings against the regime of Colonel Muammar al-Qadhafi (1969 – 2011) had strong links to global jihadi networks in general and al-Qaida specifically, particularly in eastern Libya.[10]

Groups with links to al-Qaida such as Ansar al-Sharia Libya (ASL) were able to take advantage of the insecurity, instability and lack of governance that has plagued Libya since the country split into several competing factions in the summer of 2014 and were able to establish jihadi statelets in several locations.[11] They achieved this for the most part by tapping into existing local power structures, focusing on local concerns, and in some cases muting their connections to the larger Salafi-jihadi movement. While this prioritisation of the local struggle against a 'near enemy' manifested itself differently in different Libyan contexts, there are many parallel trends which help to illuminate the local focus adopted by many al-Qaida-linked groups across Libya. However, it is important to note that there is little evidence that Zawahiri or his deputies within the central al-Qaida command structures directly control the activities of ASL or any other al-Qaida-linked group in Libya.[12] Rather, ASL is linked to al-Qaida, in particular al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), through a loose network of shared ideology, training camps, support structures, and personal connections, with each entity lacking the power to compel the other.[13]

The LIFG and Connections to the Jihadi MilieuThe Libyan 'Afghan Arabs' who travelled to jihadi fronts to fight in the 1980s and 1990s not only formed connections with a global network of Salafi-jihadi fighters, but they also formed strong connections with each other. When they returned to Libya, they sought to apply the military training and organizational experience they had learned overseas against the Qadhafi regime at home. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) was formed in Afghanistan in the early 1990s by a group of 'Afghan Arabs' but the group only formally announced its existence in 1995.[14] The LIFG engaged in guerrilla warfare against the Qadhafi regime in eastern Libya throughout the second half of the 1990s but was ultimately unsuccessful at its stated goal of overthrowing the regime.[15] As the group came under increasing pressure following the September 11th 2001 attacks, with the US listing it as a terrorist organization, many LIFG fighters went to fight for, or alongside, al-Qaida at other jihadi fronts overseas.[16] Some of al-Qaida's senior leadership figures were former LIFG members, most notably Abu Yahya al-Libi who is believed to have been second in command to Zawahiri before being killed by a drone strike in 2012.[17]

In particular, Libya's eastern cities of Derna and Benghazi had strong links to al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), the Iraqi Sunni al-Qaida affiliate founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 1999, which later evolved into ISIS. In late 2007, the so-called "Sinjar Records" revealed a strong eastern Libyan contingent among fighters who joined AQI between 2006 and 2007, with 52 fighters listed as coming from Derna alone.[18] In November 2007, Zawahiri and Abu al-Layth al-Libi, a senior LIFG figure based in Pakistan, appeared together in a video produced by al-Qaida's media arm al-Sahab to announce a merger between LIFG and al-Qaida.[19] However, despite evidence of close links at a personal level between members of the LIFG and al-Qaida, the LIFG leadership based in Libya later said the decision to merge with al-Qaida had been invalid as it did not have the agreement of the

LIFG's ruling council and denied there was any formal alliance between the two entities. The Libya-based LIFG leadership also criticised al-Qaida's strategy of indiscriminate bombings and targeting the West.[20]

From 2006 onwards, LIFG leaders, along with several other Salafists and Islamists, engaged in a process of reconciliation with the Libyan regime through Qadhafi's son Saif al-Islam Qadhafi, resulting in the LIFG formally announcing its disbandment in 2010. As a result, many Salafi-jihadists were initially slow to join the uprisings in February 2011.[21] However, once they did, their battle experience and their willingness to ally with the broader non-Islamist elements opposing Qadhafi - as a means to cement their revolutionary legitimacy - meant that they were often able to carve out effective military fiefdoms that included Islamist and non-Islamist elements. To rebrand itself and attempt to curry favour in the political climate of the Arab Spring, the LIFG transformed itself into the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change (LIMC) and a handful of figures with links to al-Qaida secured roles in Libya's new political and military governance in structures – for example former LIFG leader Abdelhakim Belhadj was made head of the powerful Tripoli Military Council.[22] Yet for the most part former Salafi-jihadists such as Belhadj, as well as other Islamist actors of all stripes, failed to transform their revolutionary prowess into significant political power. Belhadj's al-Watan party failed to secure any seats in the General National Congress (GNC) elections in July 2012, while the al-Umma al-Wasat party established by former LIFG ideologue Sami al-Saadi only won two seats.[23]

Libyans' reluctance to support Islamist or jihadi parties can be traced to a deep mistrust of political Islamism, political parties, and entities perceived to be beholden to foreign interests. Libya's population is almost entirely Sunni Muslim with a tradition of Sufism and religious moderation; the majority of Libyans do not strictly follow one religious leader or school of thought. Consequently, the sectarian divides that al-Qaida and ISIS have traditionally exploited to their advantage in Syria, Iraq and Yemen are less applicable in Libya and - potentially resultantly - Salafi-jihadi ideologies do not resonate so strongly.[24] In the Libyan collective psyche and vernacular there is often little distinction between violent Salafi-jihadi groups like al-Qaida and other non-violent Islamist groups, leading many Libyans to classify all Islamists as harbingers of terrorism, extremism and international isolation, no matter their ideology or practices.[25] Furthermore, under Qadhafi, Salafi-jihadists had little opportunity to build up local support networks, improve their popular image or institutionalise their interactions with Libyan communities as they had done in parallel instances in Egypt and Tunisia. Derna could be considered an exception to this, although for the most part Derna's Salafi-jihadi support networks were created and sustained overseas. In this context, al-Qaida affiliates quickly discovered that they needed to focus on championing local struggles rather than the larger battle for the soul of the *umma (*Islamic community*),* framing their ideology and aims within the Libyan context in order to gain traction, build networks and gain momentum in Libya.

Al-Qaida-Linked Groups in Benghazi: Flying Under the Radar

In the immediate wake of Qadhafi's ouster, the most prominent and influential al-Qaida-linked group in Libya was Ansar al-Sharia Libya (ASL), a Salafi-jihadi group which is an amalgamation of two separate groups: the Ansar al-Sharia Brigade in Benghazi (ASB) and Ansar al-Sharia in Derna (ASD). Groups under the Ansar al-Sharia banner also had a presence in Sirte, where they later defected to ISIS, as well as in Ajdabiya and Tripoli. ASB was established by Muhammad al-Zahawi in Benghazi in February 2012, while ASD was founded by former Guantanamo inmate Abu Sufian bin Qumu in Derna during the uprisings.[26] In 2012, ASL made international headlines after they were accused of being responsible for the 11 September 2012 attack against the US Special Mission in Benghazi that killed US Ambassador Chris Stevens and three others.[27] Zahawi denied his group was responsible for the attack but stopped short of condemning it.[28] ASL likewise denied that it had any links to al-Qaida or other international jihadi groups. However, ASL adheres to Salafi-jihadi ideology, rejects democracy, regularly expresses support for al-Qaida ideologues in its propaganda, and many of its leaders are known to have contact with key al-Qaida figures.[29] There is also some evidence of cooperation between ASL and AQIM, al-Qaida's official North African affiliate which has a presence in south-western Libya.[30] In 2014, both Ansar al-Sharia branches were designated as terrorist organizations by the US State Department as well as the UN.[31]

ASL experienced a significant social backlash in Libya over its suspected involvement in the attack on the

US Special Mission in 2012, particularly as the knock-on effect in Benghazi was a decline in security for the populace and worsening political isolation for the city as whole. After directly targeting America, the trope of America as the 'far enemy' proved unpopular in a city seeking to embrace the outside world after decades of marginalisation. Throughout 2012 and 2013, most international actors withdrew from the city and the campaign of assassinations against Qadhafi-era figures, journalists, judges and civil society activists intensified. [32] Although no group claimed responsibility, ASL and other Islamist militias were believed to be behind these assassinations. In order to counter its sliding popularity, ASL began to focus on winning local support in Benghazi through the provision of social health care, public services and religious teaching. As the Libyan central state increasingly failed to govern effectively in Benghazi, ASL was able to provide an alternative safety net to some communities, particularly those which did not trust the central state to provide services and governance. This allowed it to soften its Salafi-jihadi image and establish a relationship with locals that was not based purely on politics, conflict or ideology.[33]

ASL also sought to make itself more attractive by rebranding itself as a local group with local interests; ASB removed 'brigade' from its name in order to present itself as a movement rather than an armed force, consistently denied any links with al-Qaida, and championed local struggles.[34] The most important example of this is ASL's participation in the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC), a coalition of powerful Islamist militias primarily formed as a response to the anti-Islamist Operation Dignity launched in May 2014 in Benghazi by Qadhafi-era general Khalifa Haftar.[35] The BRSC included elements of Libya Shield Force 1 (LSF), the 17 February Brigade, Jaysh al-Mujahadeen and Rafallah al-Sahati Brigade, as well as ASL. BRSC designated ASL's Zahawi as its leader, with LSF's Wisam bin Hamid as the military leader and Jalal Makhzum of Rafallah al-Sahati Brigade serving as the military commander. After Zahawi's death in early 2015, bin Hamid became the most important figurehead in BRSC.[36] The BRSC functioned as an umbrella organisation under which these militias could fight against Dignity forces and protect the interests of 'revolutionaries' against the encroachment of Qadhafi-era figures such as Haftar. To some extent, ASL's participation in BRSC was undoubtedly predicated on self-preservation; however, it also served to legitimise ASL within a Libyan context. The escalating conflict between BRSC and Operation Dignity created a context in which ASL could couch its violent Salafi-jihadi ideology in revolutionary terms once more, casting Haftar as the tyrant (*taghut*) who sought to undo the gains of the revolution.[37] As a result, ASL fought alongside many non-jihadi militias in Benghazi, as well as cooperating with ISIS cells despite fighting them elsewhere in Libya - in the context of Benghazi, they were all united by the local struggle against Haftar.[38]

The BRSC succeeded in taking control of several areas of Benghazi in 2014, declaring the city an Islamic emirate, and held some areas for nearly three years.[39] However, the establishment of ISIS *wilayat* (emirates) in Libya in November 2014, and ISIS's subsequent seizure of territory around Sirte in mid-2015, increased the pressure on ASL in Benghazi. Several high-level figures and foot soldiers defected from ASL to ISIS, drawn by the promise of power and glory in Sirte.[40] Concomitantly, international support for Haftar's anti-Islamist Libyan National Army (LNA) forces was invigorated, resulting in a growing number of defeats and casualties for the BRSC. ISIS's loss of territorial control in Sirte in December 2016 at the hands of forces aligned with Libya's UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), supported by US air strikes, only served to embolden Haftar's Benghazi campaign, with the BRSC quickly losing ground and support.[41] In May 2017, ASL officially announced that it was disbanding [42] and in July 2017 Haftar declared Benghazi fully 'liberated from terrorists'.[43] Although minor clashes were still ongoing in certain areas of the city in October 2017, the military and political clout of Salafi-jihadists in Benghazi had certainly been severely undermined. Yet it is foolish to believe that al-Qaida linked groups will simply give up or that the seeds of Salafi-jihadism that they have sown in Benghazi will simply wither away.

Al-Qaida-Linked Groups in Derna: A Force to Be Reckoned With

In Derna, after the 2011 uprisings, Libyan militias with links to al-Qaida and international Salafi-jihadi networks were able to exert their control over the city far more quickly and comprehensively than their counterparts in Benghazi - or elsewhere throughout Libya for that matter. Derna had been the main stronghold for the LIFG in the 1990s and its residents had a long history of fighting for jihadi causes overseas. As a result, there was

a deep pool of recruits who were amenable to Salafi-jihadi ideology.[44] Furthermore, the city was severely marginalised and neglected under Qadhafi, meaning that the social structures which helped provide resistance to Salafi-jihadism in other areas of Libya, such as tribes, political activism and centres of learning, were weak and were easily undermined by powerful groups such as the al-Qaida-linked Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade (ASMB) and Abu Sufian bin Qumu's branch of Ansar al-Sharia in Derna (ASD). ASMB is one of the most powerful individual groups in Derna and like ASD, espouses an ultraconservative ideology and frequently cites al-Qaida ideologues.[45] However, it advocates Libyan nationalism rather than creation of a caliphate. It was one of the driving forces behind the strict implementation of Sharia law and practices in Derna from 2012 onwards. The influence of these groups grew steadily from that point, effectively turning Derna into a jihadi statelet where rival Islamist and jihadi militias fought for supremacy among themselves, cutting its residents off from the rest of the country.[46]

It was only with the establishment of an Islamic State (ISIS) offshoot in Derna in October 2014 that these al-Qaida-linked groups and other local factions opposed to ISIS made a concerted effort to rally together and consolidate their legitimacy locally.[47] ISIS swiftly began expanding its control in the city, enforcing the group's strict interpretation of Sharia law and attempting to subsume other Salafi-jihadi groups. However, there was stiff resistance from existing al-Qaida-linked groups primarily because they did not want to cede power to another group but also because they rejected the extreme brutality and foreignness of ISIS practices such as *takfiri* (declaring as infidels) edicts, crucifixions, forced child marriages, and the prohibition of smoking.[48] ASMB, ASD, Jaysh al-Islami al-Libi and other local militias joined forces to create the Derna Mujahadeen Shura Council (DMSC) and utilised local anger over ISIS's brutal tactics to portray themselves as local protectors, eventually driving ISIS out of Derna in summer 2015.[49] DMSC's victory against ISIS was also publically praised and defended by AQIM, and there is evidence that some AQIM fighters also joined the battle in Derna. [50] However, unlike in Benghazi where ASL was a key component of BRSC, it is ASMB that dominated the DMSC with ASMB leader Salim Darbi leading the DMSC. Despite Darbi's death in 2015, ASMB remains the most powerful force within the DMSC.

This championing of local political struggles was a key tactic utilised by the DMSC to strengthen its legitimacy on a local level, despite its practices being nearly as brutal and draconian as those of ISIS. After driving ISIS out of Derna, the DMSC's primary goal became defeating Khalifa Haftar and his anti-Islamist forces, a cause which was widely supported in the city due to its deep animosity for the Qadhafi regime and any figures associated with it.[51] Whereas ISIS's objective of waging global jihad and establishing an Islamic State in Libya gained little traction among Derna's powerful militias, the DMSC's bid to defeat Haftar and prevent Qadhafi-era figures from seizing the Libyan state ticked all the right boxes in that city's Byzantine local politics.[52] However, the strength of the DMSC's local support will soon be tested. In August 2017, Haftar and the LNA turned their attention from Benghazi to Derna, ramping up airstrikes against DMSC positions and enforcing a complete siege of the city, preventing even medical supplies from entering.[53] The siege has continued since then, with at least 15 civilians killed by LNA airstrikes in the city on 30 October.[54] While there is no love lost between many Derna residents and the DMSC, Haftar's tactic of collective punishment is highly reminiscent of Qadhafi's approach against the LIFG decades ago and may serve to strengthen the DMSC's role as protector of the population, despite their largely unpopular Salafi-jihadi ideologies.[55] Furthermore, while Qadhafi's regime was strong enough to temporarily crush Salafi-jihadis and force them to flee abroad, Haftar does not currently have that level of power or control. As has been shown time and again, military strategies alone cannot defeat extremist ideology - especially if the victors bring only more violence, brutality and marginalisation.

he Legacy of Salafi-Jihadism in Eastern Libya

Globally, al-Qaida has survived so long despite its defeats and setbacks because it has learnt from past failures and adapted. Where ISIS has invited direct confrontation and military annihilation through its high-profile brutality, al-Qaida has adopted a cautious bottom-up approach to building support. This keeps it below the radar, but makes it no less dangerous.[56] ASL has already applied this technique in Benghazi, and it is likely that its official disbandment is a continuation of this strategy. By publically claiming it has disbanded, ASL may

be able to protect itself against complete annihilation at the hands of Haftar's forces, distance itself from the last three years of fighting in Benghazi, and allow its members to reintegrate into the city at a social level rather than a military one. As such, they may live to fight another day and rejoin other al-Qaida linked groups. The threat that ASL directly poses may be significantly reduced in the short term, but while chaos and insecurity still reign throughout Libya, it may not take the group, or others similar to it, long to rebuild a support base. In Derna, the DMSC has cemented its legitimacy, not by watering down its ideological beliefs, but by framing its objectives so that they specifically appeal to the historic and socio-political context of Derna itself. By defeating ISIS and fighting against Haftar, the DMSC and its constituent parts have appealed to ingrained fears of central authority, thereby portraying themselves as patriotic Libyans first, Salafi-jihadis second.[57] Indeed, al-Qaida-linked groups have done a better job mimicking such local and traditional structures than their ISIS-linked equivalents.

Furthermore, there are three peculiarities of the current Libyan context that heighten the insidious and highly dangerous threat posed by al-Qaida linked groups in Libya. Firstly, although Haftar and his allies have struck a significant blow to the organisational and military capacity of Salafi-jihadi groups in Benghazi, and may soon do the same in Derna, there have been no efforts to deconstruct or delegitimize their underpinning ideology. The Salafi-jihadi movement is highly mutable and its recruits' allegiances are fluid. Therefore if al-Qaida or other groups can tap into a pool of potential recruits who have amenable beliefs, then all that is required for a new Salafi-jihadi organisational structure to emerge is the socio-political conditions in which it can thrive - namely instability, conflict and division.[58] The ideology and loyalties can be constructed in an ad hoc fashion to fit the circumstances. Although Haftar has achieved a military victory in Benghazi, defeating the BRSC will do little to improve quality of life for the city's residents if the 'victory' is not supported by a governance system that can meet their basic needs, provide security, and establish functioning institutions. At present, that seems as distant as ever, despite reinvigorated efforts at national political reconciliation.[59] Likewise while many Derna residents would like to see the DMSC vanquished, they seem unlikely to support Haftar, and the collective punishment his forces are inflicting on the city, if all that awaits them is further marginalisation and isolation under the new governing political authorities in the wake of his victory.

Secondly, it is important to recognise that the ongoing post-2014 civil war, which has normalized violence, brutality and extremism, ultimately strengthens the ability of Salafi-jihadi groups to radicalise vulnerable segments of Libyan society. Despite Haftar's vehemently anti-Islamist rhetoric and his dismissal of all his political and military opponents as terrorists, many of those fighting under his command have been accused of war crimes including the torture and extra-judicial execution of prisoners with the International Criminal Court (ICC) recently issuing an arrest warrant for Mahmoud al-Warfalli, one of Haftar's senior commanders. [60] Furthermore, Haftar's deepening alliance with powerful 'Madkhali' Salafist militias [61] in Benghazi has led to several ultra-conservative *fatwas* (religious edicts) being issued in eastern Libya, most recently denouncing Libyan followers of Ibadi Islam as infidels.[62]

The Madkhalis also appear to have a growing influence on the policies of Haftar's military governate. In February 2017, eastern Libya's military governor issued a decision banning women from travelling without a *mahram* (male chaperone).[63] This sparked outrage and was quickly rescinded, but it highlights both the increasing normalisation of such ultra-conservative practices and the willingness of Haftar and his allies to capitulate to such groups in return for military support. Indeed, far too often the violence of Salafi-jihadists has been shown to be equivalent to the horrors of war and militia rule inflicted by their opponents. It seems that any purely military fight against Salafi-jihadism has a perverse way of generating the exact conditions that help the movement to expand, namely authoritarianism, repression, human rights abuses, and the normalization of violence. By employing only military strategies to counter these groups, while simultaneously empowering rival groups with similarly violent and sometimes equally perverse ideologies, Haftar and his allies are paradoxically laying the foundations for a triumphant comeback by al-Qaida-linked groups at some point in the future.

Finally, Libya's zero-sum mentality has created a situation where hundreds of different militias and political factions exist, but few if any have a coherent, unifying vision of what they stand for or how they see the future of the country. Groups seek to rally support and exert power through external struggle against anyone seen to be

encroaching on the specific and ever-fluctuating interests that impact the members of that group, whether that is access to territory, economic resources, international patronage, or political legitimacy. Without external enemies like ISIS or Haftar, most of these groupings fall apart; the current infighting among the revolutionaries that fought together against Qadhafi is a prime example of this.

In this vacuum, the relative cohesiveness of Salafi-jihadi ideology could prove truly dangerous. While Salafi-jihadism similarly relies on an external enemy against which to rally support, it also has a core internal vision built around the establishment of a Caliphate (whether now or in the future) and the governance systems and legal practices that this entails. Arguably, no other political or religious movement, party, or militia in Libya currently has such a coherent vision. It remains to be seen whether al-Qaida linked groups can maintain their commitment to such a clear vision, while simultaneously adapting to local realities in such a granular way. Nevertheless, the dangers posed by groups adhering to Salafi-jihadism should not be defined by their capacity or desire to function as the Libyan extension of transnational al-Qaida, ISIS, or future jihadi movements. In the Libyan context, al-Qaida and ISIS appear to be associative monikers that local jihadi groups deploy, as it suits them, to better wage their local struggles. The rise of Salafi-jihadism in Libya is a symptom of broader, deeper governance problems; without sustained, unified efforts to address these problems, these groups will continue to have the opportunity, the means and most likely the followers to establish local fiefdoms and destabilize society in a way that could take generations to undo.

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