

The Derna Mujahideen Shura Council: A Revolutionary Islamist Coalition in Libya

by Kevin Truitte

Abstract

The Derna Mujahideen Shura Council (DMSC) – later renamed the Derna Protection Force – was a coalition of Libyan revolutionary Islamist groups in the city of Derna in eastern Libya. Founded in a city with a long history of hardline Salafism and ties to the global jihadist movement, the DMSC represented an amalgamation of local conservative Islamism and revolutionary fervor after the 2011 Libyan Revolution. This article examines the group's significant links to both other Libyan Islamists and to al-Qaeda, but also its ideology and activities to provide local security and advocacy of conservative governance in Derna and across Libya. This article further details how the DMSC warred with the more extremist Islamic State in Derna and with the anti-Islamist Libyan National Army, defeating the former in 2016 but ultimately being defeated by the latter in mid-2018. The DMSC exemplifies the complex local intersection between revolution, Islamist ideology, and jihadism in contemporary Libya.

Keywords: Libya, Derna, Derna Mujahideen Shura Council, al-Qaeda, Islamic State

Introduction

The city of Derna has, for more than three decades, been a center of hardline Islamist jihadist dissent in eastern Libya. During the rule of Libya's strongman Muammar Qaddafi, the city hosted members of the al-Qaeda-linked Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and subsequently served as their stronghold after reconciliation with the Qaddafi regime. The city sent dozens of jihadists to fight against the United States in Iraq during the 2000s. After the 2011 Libyan Revolution deposed Qaddafi, the city continued to serve as a center of gravity for rigorist Salafists with links to broader jihadist trends, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL). After the formation of the Islamic State (IS) in 2014, a number of local fighters pledged allegiance (*bay'a*) to IS Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

It would be in Derna's tradition of hardline Islamism and in the spirit of the 2011 Libyan Revolution that the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council (DMSC) emerged. The group, a broad coalition of local and regional militias, was founded by locals and former LIFG members to provide security to the city as it became increasingly isolated. It was also meant to support allied Islamist revolutionary-oriented groups – such as the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries (BRSC) – in their fight against the anti-Islamist Libyan National Army (LNA) and its leader, General Khalifa Haftar. The DMSC – later renamed the Derna Protection Force (DPF) – provided security and a semblance of governance against the LNA, as veteran jihadists and jihadist-linked figures found refuge in the city under its protective umbrella. The DMSC was also the first Islamist group in Libya to break with the Islamic State, leading to nearly a year of conflict between the two organizations before IS finally completely withdrew from the city's environs.

In the wake of the 2011 revolution, Libya has become an increasingly complex fractured polity, dividing along tribal, regional, religious, political, personal, and other dimensions. Existing English language literature on militant Islamist groups in Libya in particular has largely focused either on local branches of IS – such as the group's now defunct *Barqa* (Cyrenaica), *Tarabulus* (Tripoli), and *Fezzan* provinces – or al-Qaeda (AQIM or ASL), or on the ties between these global jihadist organizations and local actors. This approach often reduces the local actors' agency and disregards or downplays the local and historical situation in which each group exists, particularly in the complex post-revolution environment.

The DMSC represents these local complexities in Libya, wherein jihadists, non-jihadist Salafists, and even more moderate revolutionaries can operate under a coalition banner against common enemies. Its enemies –

using labels often repeated by Western media – portrayed the DMSC to be a “terrorist” Salafi-Jihadist group with al-Qaeda ties.[1] Alternatively, those who support the organization, either out of ideological affinity or due to common foes, often refer to DMSC fighters as “revolutionaries” who fight in the spirit of the 2011 Libyan Revolution.[2] The Derna-based group does not fit neatly into either category; it is a product both of hardline religious conservatism and historical participation in Salafi-Jihadist activities – in which many of its members participated or shared ties to – along with nationalist objectives that arose from participation in rebellion and revolution within Libya. The DMSC provided both a social, political, and security model that co-opted both the spirit of the 2011 revolution along with the traditional conservative religious identity of Derna and eastern Libya broadly. While the group and its constituent militia groups maintained ties with global and more localized jihadists and even hosted al-Qaeda-linked individuals, it cannot be said to have been a purely Salafi-jihadist organization, nor did it aim to launch terrorist attacks abroad.

The Derna Mujahideen Shura Council/Derna Protection Force was largely driven from the city of Derna in 2018 by an LNA military offensive. In its collapse, a significant number of its leaders were killed or captured, along with jihadist religious and political leaders. The DMSC provides an insight into the complex ties between Libyan revolutionaries, jihadists, and local politics and religion in the chaos of Libya’s fractured political-security landscape.

This article aims to explore the history, composition, ideology, and activities of the DMSC as a hardline Islamist organization focusing on local Derna and Libya-centric issues. It further aims to review the direct ties or indirect links between the DMSC and other local militant Islamist coalitions and foreign terrorist organizations. The group highlights the landscape in which Islamist militias have existed after 2011 in Libya, and how it responded to local challenges as well as to the global contest between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State to dominate the narratives of Salafi-Jihadism. While the DMSC’s experience is unique due to its situation, it serves as an example of possible organizational and strategic decision-making by a revolutionary Islamist coalition in a local Libyan context.

Eastern Libya’s Religious Conservatism and the Libyan Jihadists

Eastern Libya – also known as Cyrenaica – can trace its conservative theological roots to the emergence of the Sanusi order in the 19th century.[3] Al-Sayyid Muhammad bin Ali al-Sanusi, the founder of the stringent Sufi order, combined political and religious elements in his aim to “purify” Islam of innovations (*bida’*) and return to practices observed during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. This hardline theological interpretation – commonly referred to today as Salafism – rejects more flexible Islamic concepts such as consensus (*ijma*) and religious analogy (*qiyas*), found in other schools of Islam more common in other parts of Libya.[4] The 1969 coup d’état by Colonel Muammar Qaddafi deposed the Sanusi leadership in Libya, and the Qaddafi regime marginalized the eastern Libyan Islamist community for decades.[5]

As elsewhere in the Islamic world, the 1980s Afghan War spurred religious Libyans’ discontent about government repression and lack of economic opportunities at home to travel to Afghanistan to fight in the *jihad* against the Soviets. After the war, many of these Libyans returned to Libya or joined Osama bin Laden and his emerging jihadist group, al-Qaeda, in Sudan.[6] Libyan veteran jihadists of the Afghanistan war founded the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), with the aim of “purifying Islam” in Libya of “Qaddafi’s apostasy.” Building its numbers and insurgent capabilities during the early 1990s, LIFG officially declared its formation in 1995. Drawing on the historic Sanusi puritanical influences in Cyrenaica as a base of support, the group conducted attacks against security forces in the eastern cities of Benghazi and Derna and attempted several assassinations against Qaddafi.[7]

The Qaddafi regime succeeded in suppressing LIFG domestically by the early 2000s, although some members continued to engage in jihadist activities abroad. Libya sent the second largest number of foreign fighters to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) – after Saudi Arabia – between August 2006 and August 2007, according to documents seized by U.S. forces in 2007.[8] Derna alone provided the largest number of foreign fighters of any city in

the Middle East to AQI, with fifty-two joining the fight against the U.S. in that year alone.[9] In 2007, then-al-Qaeda's second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri and Libyan al-Qaeda leader Abu Laith al-Libi declared LIFG to be part of al-Qaeda.[10] However, many LIFG leaders in Libya rejected the declaration and in 2009, more than one hundred imprisoned former LIFG members – including those with personal ties to al-Qaeda leadership – published a treatise reconciling with the Qaddafi regime and rejecting al-Qaeda's ideology and suicide attacks.[11]

Despite the rapprochement with the regime in the 2000s, former LIFG members – including those who later founded the DMSC – played leading roles in the 2011 Libyan Revolution and the overthrow of Qaddafi. Derna in particular served as an important center for pro-jihadist rebels who fought in the revolution. For example, Abdul Hakim Al-Hasadi, an Afghan War veteran and former LIFG leader who fought the United States in 2001-2002 in Afghanistan before being detained and transferred to Libyan custody, led the Derna-based Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade (ASMB) – named after the 1996 massacre of over one thousand prisoners at Abu Salim prison by the Qaddafi regime.[12][13] Al-Hasadi, however, argued that he and the ASMB did not fight against the regime as agents of “Afghanistan” – an indirect reference to al-Qaeda – or to divide Libya, but to support the revolution.[14] Others, including Abu Sufyan bin Qamu, a driver for bin Laden who spent six years as a prisoner in Guantanamo Bay, also settled in Derna and led fighters in the revolution. Bin Qamu went on to form the Derna branch of the al-Qaeda-linked Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL) in late 2011.[15]

Founding and Composition of the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council

After the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime, the city of Derna became a haven for hardline Islamist militias. By 2014, however, these hardliners and their revolutionary compatriots in other cities in eastern Libya – principally Benghazi and Ajdabiya – found themselves confronted by General Khalifa Haftar and his coalition of militias. This self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) had declared war on “terrorism and extremism” (in other words, on Islamist militias) in Libya.[16] Reacting to this threat, a coalition of anti-Haftar and Islamist factions in Benghazi founded the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC) in July 2014 to combat Haftar and the LNA, which launched a military offensive against the city and the BRSC in October 2014.[17]

In Derna, local Islamist and anti-Haftar leaders similarly founded the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council (*Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen Derna*, the DMSC) in December 2014. Salim Derby, a former LIFG fighter then in command of the ASMB in Derna, announced the group's foundation in a speech that attacked “the work of the criminal Haftar” and praised the BRSC, stating that the DMSC would stand with the Benghazi Islamist coalition.[18] The DMSC sought to bring together a number of Islamist militias in the city, to provide security to Derna and its surrounding areas from Haftar's LNA, and to further support BRSC forces in their battle against the LNA in Benghazi. While Derby's ASMB dominated the composition of the umbrella group, other militias that comprised the DMSC included the Al-Noor Brigade, led by Nasr al-Akr, another prominent LIFG Afghan War veteran also known as Abdullah Saber. He would take on a leadership role in the Shura Council, the bin Qamu's Derna branch of Ansar al-Sharia, and another group known as the Libyan Islamic Army (*Jaysh Libya al-Islami*) – although the Libyan Islamic Army appears to have dissolved ties with the DMSC in February 2015.[19][20][21]

Later DMSC would also see allied militia forces from across Cyrenaica join its ranks as it battled the Islamic State and the LNA. In September 2015, the Bayda-based Ali Hassan al-Jaber Brigade under Colonel Mohammed Abu Ghafayar defected from the LNA and aligned itself with the DMSC.[22] In October 2015, revolutionary fighters from the Qataan Tribe in Tobruq, also came to Derna to ally with the ranks of the DMSC.[23] In November 2015, the Asait Tribe in the Green Mountain (Jabal Akhdar) region surrounding Derna also pledged its support to the Shura Council.[24] These alliances were driven not only by ideological affinity, but by an alignment of convenience in opposition to the LNA and in support of the DMSC's war against the Islamic State's forces in Derna.

Conflict with the Islamic State

The DMSC, likely by design, excluded a large segment of jihadist militias in Derna from its ranks. These groups – the Battar Brigade and the Shura Council of Islamic Youth – pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) in 2014 and were formally recognized as IS-*Wilayat Barqa* (Cyrenaica Province).[25][26] The Islamic State's influence in Derna generated friction between the pro-DMSC and pro-IS factions. Prior to the formation of the DMSC, in October 2014, the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade had refused to pledge allegiance to any group based outside of Libya – an implicit rejection of calls by IS affiliates in the city to join Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's caliphate project.[27] In February 2015, IS' Battar Brigade declared takfir [excommunication] on Haftar, Qaddafi loyalists, supporters of democracy, and called on all militia groups – including DMSC members – to repent and join IS.[28] In April 2015, IS fighters further alienated the population and increased local tensions after a gun battle with a Derna family led to the deaths of ten IS members and six members of the family, whereupon IS publicly crucified three additional family members.[29]

In June 2015, friction between the DMSC and IS reached a boiling point. On June 9, IS fighters attacked and killed DMSC deputy chairman Nasr al-Akr, who had become an outspoken critic of IS both in the city and internationally.[30] In the aftermath of the assassination, the DMSC declared war against the Islamic State and its affiliates, and the ASMB spearheaded the coalition's attacks against the latter's checkpoints across the city.[31] While the DMSC managed to take control over large parts of the city in the first few days of fighting, DMSC leader Salim Darbi was killed in early clashes.[32] Atiya Sayyed al-Sha'eri, an ASBM commander and DMSC official, replaced Darbi as head of the Shura Council until his death in 2018.[33]

Despite Islamic State fighters' suicide attacks, DMSC forces consolidated control over most of the city in the following months, although fighting in several neighborhoods lasted for the better part of a year. The group launched at least two named offensives, the "Battle of al-Nahrawan" in the summer of 2015 [34] and the "Battle of the Martyrs of al-Quba" in autumn of that year.[35] However, IS continued to maintain a presence on the outskirts in the mountainous Fatayih area, from where the group launched artillery attacks on the city.[36] Islamic State forces in Derna collapsed completely on April 20, 2016, as remaining fighters from the group fled to the Islamic State-held city of Sirte in central Libya.[37]

The DMSC also combated the Islamic State through information warfare. The group dismissed Syria-based IS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's Ramadan 2015 audio statement that had denounced the DMSC as cooperating with *kufr* (Unbelievers) and that had referred to the shura council as *sahwat* – a pejorative slang word derived from the Awakening Movement in Iraq. The group countered by saying that the Islamic State were *takfiris* (apostates) and denounced IS' claim that it alone fought on the path of God, while leaving open the door for future "repentance" and reconciliation.[38] The DMSC regularly referred to the Islamic State as *khuwarij*, a reference to a puritanical absolutist sect that emerged in the first century of Islam.[39] In August 2015, DMSC praised an ultimately failed uprising by local Salafists against the Islamic State's rule in Sirte, calling the embattled insurgents their "brothers and family" and encouraging them in their fight against the *khuwarij*. [40] In October 2015, the group issued another statement clearly aimed at Islamic State fighters. Layered with quotations from the *Qur'an*, the statement called for IS fighters to surrender in return for promises of forgiveness. The statement further called for IS fighters to fight alongside the DMSC to free the "oppressed" – probably an indirect reference to the conflict with General Haftar and the LNA.[41] While the success of this propaganda ploy is debatable – no reports of mass surrenders of IS fighters surfaced immediately thereafter – nearly six hundred IS fighters reportedly surrendered to DMSC forces in the year-long conflict between the factions.[42]

DMSC's Ideology and Activities

The DMSC's ideology was grounded in the traditional conservative Islamism of eastern Libya. The DMSC stressed several times that it would support any Libyan national government based on adherence to *sharia* law (Islamic law on the basis of the *Qur'an* and the *hadith*) as the sole source of legislation. This led the group to

applaud the then-Tripoli based, Islamist-dominated General National Council (GNC) government in February 2016 for its efforts to amend existing Libyan laws to further align with *shari'a* law and invalidate all law that was not *shari'a* compliant.[43] Building on this, the group also called upon Libyan scholars to amend laws to support Derna's Shari'a Court, which had already adopted the enforcement of laws related to alcohol, adultery, and other crimes with penalties in accordance with provisions from the *Qur'an* and *hadith*.[44]

The ideology of the Shura Council further blended these conservative theological interpretations with revolutionary rhetoric. As the DMSC was formed by militia groups that had fought in the 2011 revolution against the Qaddafi regime, it also emphasized in its statements the importance of adherence to the principles of the "17 February Revolution" for the governance of Libya.[45] Both concepts were brought into practice in the 2016 "Derna Mujahideen Shura Council's Charter: Its Creed and Methodology." The charter stressed adherence to Islamic law and its provisions as the sole accepted source of legislation, stressing that support for any Libyan government must be agreed upon by the Libyan people. In addition, it rejected efforts to disturb Libya's unity as well as foreign interference threatening Libya's stability or territorial integrity, or foreign-backed groups that abuse Muslims or their property. The DMSC charter also recognized the legitimacy of the Tripoli-based Fatwa House (*Dar al-Ifta*) and its Imam, the controversial Islamist Sheikh Sadeq al-Ghariani who also backed the BRSC, the Ajdabiya Shura Council, and later the Benghazi Defense Brigades.[46]

The DMSC's 2016 Charter further called for the activation of civil administration and the establishment of a security department in Derna.[47] Since its founding, the Shura Council implemented civil projects in the city, in addition to providing security, particularly after the conflict with the Islamic State erupted. To provide security, law, and order in the city, the Shura Council opened police stations and conducted police patrols, publicized an emergency number for residents, and arrested individuals for crimes such as theft and drug dealing.[48][49][50][51] Both the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade and Ansar al-Sharia's Derna branch also conducted independent raids and destroyed contraband considered "un-Islamic," such as illicit liquor.[52] The DMSC also engaged in health and safety standards enforcement, e.g. requiring restaurant owners to display health department certificates and adhere to cleanliness standards.[53][54]

The Derna Mujahideen Shura Council also attempted to develop the city's infrastructure, despite Derna being under siege by the LNA and, until April 2016, by the Islamic State. Two December 2015 statements emphasized that the group was working with local groups to "accomplish their goals of reconstruction and development" and that it had established a "passport administration" and signed a contract with a company to repair major roads leading into the city.[55][56] The group even attempted to woo international companies to return to Libya with its security guarantees, explicitly identifying a Korean company and a Turkish company to return to complete projects abandoned in 2011 during the revolution.[57]

The DMSC operated a complex media apparatus. Until it was banned, the group managed its media publications through its Derna al-Morasel outlet.[58] Furthermore, the group's unofficial media affiliate, Al-Ahed Media Foundation, published the group's statements and photo sets, as well as updates on the security situation in the city.[59] In November 2015, the group reiterated that all official releases would bear the group's logo, and named the official representatives of the group's media office as Muhammad Idris Tahir and Hafis Miftah al-Daba'a.[60] Mohammed al-Mansouri served as the DMSC's official spokesperson.[61] In addition to written statements, the DMSC produced videos of combat and security operations by the group, testimonials of local residents, and propaganda aimed against the LNA and the Islamic State.[62][63][64][65] For example, the group sought to capitalize on internal conflicts in the LNA: a statement released in January 2016 discussed a recent split between former LNA spokesman Mohammed al-Hijazi and General Haftar, describing the event as the beginning of the end of the LNA and stating the group would be willing to accept repentant fighters who wished to defect.[66] The DMSC also published an interview with a former LNA fighter who had defected to the city with the Ali Hassan al-Jaber Brigade that praised the Shura Council.[67]

While the DMSC's official messaging mainly focused on issues local to Derna, Cyrenaica, or Libya – ensuring a *shari'a* compliant legal system, emphasizing its charity and civil works projects in the city, or glorifying the fights against the Islamic State and the Libyan National Army – the group's media occasionally targeted international

actors or discussed global issues. After BRSC fighters downed a French special forces helicopter in July 2016, the DMSC released a statement criticizing France for its support for Haftar and the LNA in Benghazi.[68] The group also repeatedly criticized Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi for Egypt's periodic airstrikes against the city and Egypt's support for the LNA.[69] The DMSC released a statement on the Syrian Civil War in support of Islamist rebel groups fighting the Assad government and on the Myanmar government's ethno-religious persecution of its Muslim Rohingya minority.[70][71] Despite such statements, however, the group's messaging primarily focused on domestic issues.

Ties to Libya's Other Local Militant Islamists

As stated, during its establishment the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council was created to resist anti-Islamists allied with General Haftar and his LNA and to support other Libyan Islamists. The group's ties with Sheikh Ghariyani (recognized as their legitimate Imam), the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council, and other groups in Libya's local Islamist militant sphere reiterated their alignment with anti-LNA, Islamist revolutionary factions in the country. The group released several statements in support of BRSC fighters in holdout districts in Benghazi after the LNA took control of large swaths of that city. These included supporting and then eulogizing Derna fighters fighting the LNA in the holdout coastal district of Qanfudah with a video entitled "Last Message from the Champions of Derna, the Victorious of Qanfudah." [72] In January 2018, the group would memorialize the last Islamist militants in Benghazi as "the Heroes of Akhraybish" after the LNA cleared that final district in the city.[73] In May 2018, DMSC eulogized Wissam bin Hamid, the leader of the BRSC who was killed by LNA forces earlier in the year.[74] Fighters from the defeated BRSC – members of the Free Libya Martyrs Brigade – who had fled Benghazi traveled to Derna to join DMSC forces in late 2017 after the fall of the city.[75]

The DMSC celebrated the foundation of the Benghazi Defense Brigade (BDB), an alliance of soldiers, former police, and Islamist fighters displaced from Benghazi by the LNA and funded by western Libyan Islamists and anti-Haftar figures, including Sheikh Gharyani.[76] It praised the BDB for its "Return to Benghazi" operation and the BDB's efforts to "combat injustice" and "preserve the principles of the 2011 Revolution".[77] While the BDB is a broad coalition founded on common grievances against the LNA, the DMSC's support for the Islamist-dominated group reiterated its alignment to revolutionary Islamism in Libya and its strong anti-LNA stance.

When combined with its public emphasis on *shari'a*-based Islamic government in Derna and nationally, the DMSC's alliances with Sheikh Ghariyani, the BRSC, the BDB, and other Libyan revolutionary Islamist militias reiterate the group's position in a collective Islamist pan-Libyan political-religious project. These forces stood in opposition to the anti-Islamists allied to General Khalifa Haftar, whose views they saw as antithetical to the goals of the 2011 uprising and their Islamist values; these were characterized as revolutionary ideals, rather than as pan-Islamist dreams. The DMSC itself was formed as collective opposition of constituent members to the looming threat of the LNA. It offered safe haven to allies from across Cyrenaica, based on common foes, not just identical Islamist goals. While more hardline members within the coalition and amongst its compatriots elsewhere in Libya may have identified with broader jihadist trends, the organization itself did not overtly do so.

DMSC and the Global Jihadist Movement

The DMSC coalition was founded as a local movement. From the earliest days of the revolution, Derna's revolutionary leaders and former jihadists who had fought in Afghanistan and elsewhere claimed that their actions were undertaken as a national, rather than as a transnational, movement.[79] The DMSC would make efforts to reject assertions that it was linked to al-Qaeda – a common refrain by its adversaries, given its leaders' history in Afghanistan and with the LIFG.[79]

The reality, however, is more nuanced. While the DMSC did not actively engage in *jihad* against Western

countries or interests, the city of Derna under its control served as a haven for elements connected to al-Qaeda, and many constituent members maintained strong ties to al-Qaeda and pro-al-Qaeda factions. Most prominent among these was the Derna branch of Ansar Sharia in Libya, the group believed responsible for the 2012 attacks on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi.[80] Former Guantanamo inmate bin Qamu's group did not have a visible presence in the conflict with the Islamic State in Derna – save a response denying the Islamic State's claims that it received assistance from the “apostate” Tripoli government and that large numbers of the group had pledged *bay'a* to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – but instead focused on its conflict with the LNA outside of the city.[81][82] ASL maintained the Sheikh Miloud al-Sadaqa training camp and engaged in *da'wa* activities (missionary work) in Derna.[83] According to the testimonies of two Tunisian foreign fighters detained near Derna, ASL's training camps across Libya served to prepare fighters for foreign attacks or for *jihad* in Syria.[84] Moreover, “Ansar al-Sharia” was the chosen name of al-Qaeda-linked front groups set up after the 2011 Arab Uprisings, part of a “go local” strategy the terrorist group engaged in to capitalize on the post-revolution instability in order to ingratiate itself and its ideology with local communities.[85]

The Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade also has close links to al-Qaeda. The group's top leaders were linked with al-Qaeda as Afghan War veterans and LIFG members. Furthermore, the bombmaker and U.S.-designated al-Qaeda operative Abdulbasit Azzouz was not only a close associate of the late ASMB/DMSC leader Nasr al-Akr, but he had also served as a member of the ASMB and as deputy commander of al-Akr's Al-Noor Battalion in 2012. The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency described Azzouz as having established a group in 2012 (called Brigades of the Captive Omar Abdul Rahman) to conduct attacks against Western targets, and suggested he could possibly have been al-Qaeda leader Aymann al-Zawahiri's representative to Libya.[86] Azzouz was arrested in 2014 in Turkey, and his current whereabouts are unknown.[87]

ASL in Derna and the DMSC also received ideological and rhetorical support for their activities from al-Qaeda groups based outside of Libya. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) came to the defense of the ASMB when the Islamic State leveled charges of *takfir* against the brigade. An official statement released by AQIM on June 26, 2015 refuted the charges while heavily implying that Ansar al-Sharia in Libya was closely connected with AQIM.[88] Further, AQIM released a statement in July 2015 which placed the blame of the ongoing violence between the Islamic State and the DMSC on IS. The July statement further praised the DMSC for its takeover of the city.[89] Another al-Qaeda affiliated individual, former Egyptian Special Forces officer turned jihadist Hisham Ali Ashmawi Masad Ibrahim (also known as Abu Omar al-Muhajir) allegedly found shelter in Derna. The Islamic State issued a wanted poster for him in August 2015, accusing him of waging war against the group in support of the DMSC. Ashmawi is known for his Egyptian pro-al-Qaeda group, al-Mourabitoun, which conducted attacks against Egyptian security forces and officials, and may have been providing training for DMSC fighters as well as planning attacks against Egypt.[90]

The fall of Derna and the defeat of the DMSC witnessed several pro-al-Qaeda individuals who had been based in the city killed or arrested by the LNA. Omar Refaai Sorour, an Egyptian theologian for the DMSC and wanted terrorist in Egypt, was killed in clashes. Sorou (also known as Abu Abdullah al-Masri) was the son of jihadi ideologue and al-Zawahiri companion Rifa'i Surour. His death was mourned by pro-jihadi scholars around the world, including the Moroccan jihadi preacher Omar al-Haddouchi.[91] A former Libyan football player and AQIM-linked fighter, Idris Mikraz, blew himself up in a car bomb attack targeting LNA forces late in the conflict.[92] When DMSC leader Atiya Sayyed al-Sha'eri was killed in the fighting, the Gaza-based pro-al-Qaeda group Jaish al-Umma issued a statement offering its condolences to the DMSC.[93]

The DMSC's relationships with al-Qaeda or with pro-al-Qaeda groups appear on the surface to be based on personal history, tactical convenience, and similarities in ideology, rather than the Shura Council's overt aspirations to achieve the broader aims of global jihad. While al-Qaeda branches provided rhetorical support and al-Qaeda-linked individuals may have provided training and material support to the Derna-based coalition, the DMSC did not openly espouse the narrative of global jihad, and only rarely did they publicly address topics beyond the Libyan context. The DMSC's conflict with the Islamist State in Derna does not appear to have come about as a result of the al-Qaeda-Islamic State split internationally, but is rather due to the Islamic State's caustic activities in Derna itself. Despite not emphasizing a program of jihad internationally, the DMSC and Derna did

provide a refuge for individuals and groups who did. Continuing the city's tradition as a haven for jihadists, ASL's training camps near the city that sent fighters abroad and the presence of al-Qaeda-friendly ideologues reiterate that the DMSC was not wholly opposed to these activities by others. The Islamist group's shelter for radicals ultimately may have indirectly contributed to terrorist attacks abroad.

The Fall of Derna

After years of conflict, mediation and reconciliation efforts between pro-Haftar and pro-DMSC militias failed to alleviate the tensions between the two sides. In May 2018, General Haftar declared peace efforts dead and ordered his forces to conquer the city.[94] In response, the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council and its allied forces declared a "Battle of the Defense of Derna" to repel the advancing LNA.[95] On May 11, Atiya Sayyed al-Sha'eri called for a unification of militia groups in Derna and declared a reorganization of the DMSC under the name "Derna Protection Force" (DPF).[96]

The declaration of the DPF would be the last statement issued by the group. Derna fell to General Haftar and the Libyan National Army by mid-2018. The LNA claimed to seize Ansar al-Sharia's stronghold in the Temsket district of the city by late May.[97] Despite calls by Sheikh Gharyani for his followers to launch or support jihad against foreign states that allegedly supported the LNA campaign against Derna (e.g., France and the United Arab Emirates) and despite sporadic calls by militants – including a number of fighters in the city of Ghariyan in Western Libya – to support the DMSC, no help would be forthcoming.[98] Al-Sha'eri and many other leaders and fighters of the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council were killed, and Abu Sufyan Bin Qamu was detained by LNA forces.[99] On June 28, 2018, General Khalifa Haftar announced the city of Derna liberated from "terrorists." Despite residual skirmishes in isolated pockets of the city by holdout fighters, the DMSC/DPF, losing fighters, leadership, and control of the city ceased to exist as an organization.[100]

Conclusion

The Derna Mujahideen Shura Council was a coalition largely unique in its combination of revolutionary militias and jihadist veterans. This heavily influenced its ideology, which combined the fervor and energy of the 2011 Libyan Revolution with Salafist religious values. The group operated locally in defense of the city of Derna and its conservative traditions, while linked – but not beholden – to jihadists and revolutionary Islamists inside Libya as well as beyond it. It was one of the first Islamist groups in Libya to break with the Islamic State and fought a year-long campaign against the more extreme jihadist group. Under siege from the Libyan National Army, the DMSC eventually fell to its hated enemies, as its allies in Benghazi had before it. The survivors of Derna may yet turn to their more extremist allies and bolster the ranks of groups such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, but today Derna can no longer provide the stronghold for Islamist revolutionaries and jihadist-leaning ideologues that it once was.

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Notes

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