

IISA's Blog Post



Institute for Islamic Strategic Affairs

[LIBYA: ISLAMIC STATE AND THE FAILED SIRTE UPRISING]



Libya: Islamic State and the failed Sirte uprising

Tasia Wagner

It began on August 7th 2015, during Friday prayer. Salafi Imam Khalid bin Rajab Ferjani, who led the Qartaba Mosque in Sirte, spoke out against the Islamic State (IS) group and urged residents not to sign repentance documents. According to a local journalist, Ezzeldin Ahmed, IS had called on those working for the police, the judiciary, and the financial sector to pledge allegiance to them or face a penalty of death.¹ Moreover, Imam Khalid bin Rajab Ferjani had also refused to allow IS to take over his mosque, according to the Libyan Herald.

“[Imam Khalid bin Rajab Ferjani] said that repenting in front of IS was prohibited by Islam and he said that IS did not represent real Muslims and [that they] were corrupting the Islamic faith,”² Mohamed, a local resident said.

Four days later, on August 11th, Imam Khalid bin Rajab Ferjani was murdered. His death rallied local residents, from Raqm Thalatha or the Number Three

neighbourhood of Sirte, against the Islamic State. By Thursday, the armed uprising, led by Ferjani fighters, had successfully killed two IS commanders: Abu Hammam Masri, an Egyptian citizen, and Abu Huzaiifa Ansari, a Saudi national.

Yet, the Islamic State led a ferocious counter-offensive, killing an unconfirmed number of people³ and have since gained control over not only Raqm Thalatha (“No. 3”) neighbourhood, but Raqm Wahed (“No.1”) and Raqm Ithnan (“No.2”), as well. IS has also said that they will continue to execute captured rebels⁴.

Twelve resistance leaders, belonging to the Ferjani tribe, were publicly beheaded and then crucified by ISIS. “It seems that the public flaunting of these murders is intended to send a message to anyone challenging ISIL in Libya,”⁵ a spokesman for the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Rupert Colville, said.

IS also set fire to the local hospital, leaving injured rebels no place to turn to treat their wounds. “There were injured people, literally dying in the streets, but no one could get in or out of the area to help them. We know that at least 40 people have been killed in the fighting, but we fear there are many more dead,”⁶ a senior resident said. According to the Italian foreign doctors association, Libyan doctors were forced to treat only the wounded from IS and their sympathizers. This leaves many of the wounded at a high risk to succumb to their wounds due to haemorrhaging and infections.⁷

THE MILITIAS VERSUS THE ISLAMIC STATE

Libya's militias have been at the front lines in the battle against IS. Unconfirmed reports⁸ claim that Zintan and Misratan elders met to discuss a joint operation against ISIS in Sirte and that fighters from Misratan militias, Amazigh fighters, Tripoli groups, and pro-LNA Wareshevanna forces moved to retake the city. Other reports allege that Misratan Brigade 166 went to reclaim Sirte, but turned back after

realizing that there were no reinforcements.⁹

Last week, the Libyan Army celebrated its 75 anniversary, having a parade in its honour in the centre of Tripoli. A Sirte resident, Ahmed, noted that “While ordinary civilians, including some women – one of whom was killed – fought against IS in the streets of Sirte, hundreds of trained soldiers were marching in Tripoli. This is really shameful. Sirte is becoming like the IS capital of Libya and, when the people rose up against it, *no one came to help.*”¹⁰

Back in March, Misrata's Brigade 166 fought against IS in Sirte, killing 17 of their fighters. Another fight broke out in June, when Brigade 166 killed 24 fighters and injured 39. Yet, the militia's success has been stymied by equipment shortages. “We can stay on the front line eating bread and drinking only water, but forces can't stay there without ammunition and weapons,”¹¹ Mohamed Zadma, Commander of Brigade 166 said.

Libya currently has a four year arms embargo in place since 2011 by the United Nations Security Council.

LIBYA CALLS FOR ARAB SUPPORT

The internationally recognized government of Libya has called for Arab air strikes in Sirte. “Libya's temporary government urges... the Arab brother states... to conduct air strikes against positions of the Daesh [ISIS] terrorist group in Sirte”¹², a cabinet statement by the Libyan ministry said.

During a meeting with the Arab league on August 18th, Libya's foreign minister Mohammed Al Dairi asked for support in his opening statements. “The Libyan air force is not capable of conducting air strikes against Daesh [IS] in Sirte.

Libyan national security is Arab national security... Libya is suffering and we are fed up with the atrocities of the terrorist groups”¹³, he said.

The Arab countries have so far remained divided over the power struggle in Libya.

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

Will there be international intervention in Libya? Western powers, comprising of the United States of America, Germany, France, Italy, the United Kingdom and Spain, released a joint

statement on August 16th, seemingly dismissing the possibility of military intervention.

“We are deeply concerned about reports that these fighters have shelled densely populated parts of the city and committed indiscriminate acts of violence to terrorize the Libyan population,” the statement read. “There is no military solution to the political conflict in Libya”¹⁴, it added.

Despite this dismissal, The Times¹⁵ has reported that British troops will be deployed in Libya as part of an effort to fight against the IS in an international peacekeeping mission. The United States, Germany, Spain and France (also known as P3+5) are said to also deploy troops once a unity government, between Libya's two sides, is formed. Along with counter-terrorism operations, the mission's purpose is said to “rebuild organs of the state and train security forces.”

On the other hand, a communiqué by the Arab League on August 18 noted that it an “Arab strategy” is needed to fight the Islamic State in Libya. “The situation has become more pressing in the difficult circumstances to speed up

putting together an Arab strategy to fight Daesh (Islamic State) terrorism”¹⁶, it read. According to Jordan's Ambassador to the Arab League, Bashir Khasawneh, the body plans to meet on 27 August to discuss operational steps.¹⁷ Earlier this year, the Arab League agreed to create a joint Arab military force in order to tackle the “unprecedented” threats to the region, such as extremism and political instability.¹⁸

ONGOING PEACE TALKS BETWEEN RIVAL GOVERNMENTS AND POST SIRTE UPRISING

Libya's political landscape is divided between two rival governments: the General National Congress, located in the country's capital Tripoli, and the internationally recognized government, currently exiled in Tobruk. Although a new round of peace talks has begun, with the prospects of a unity government

by September of this year, questions about Libya's internal security institutions remain at the forefront. In particular, questions about the role of the various militias, who are factionalized between the two rival governments, remain unanswered.

In conclusion, given the ‘civil-war’ like internal state of Libya, Sirte uprising - if succeeded – could have had significant implication on country’s future. Failed uprisings are always quashed brutally so a strong and brutal response from IS was to be expected. However, the Sirte uprising also shows the soft underbelly of IS: that it is vulnerable to different set of forces, may they be ideological or local. The failed uprising will give IS the opportunity to reflect on its ‘vulnerabilities’ on one hand and on the other it will send a message to counter IS forces that taking on Islamic State in Libya remains a difficult task

About Us

IISA is a think-tank and an intellectual forum for addressing the current and future dynamics of the Islamic-world and its interaction with Western civilisation. Based in London, IISA will create trans-Islamic and global reach. IISA seeks to establish a platform where Islamic-world's dynamics, trends, issue, problems or crises are analysed within the Islamic-world and by working on local models and realities and not against any external standards or perceptions. We will be one of the leading think-tank on the Islamic-world and its role in the contemporary global system. In a short span of time we have attracted great academic support and a reputation for both open and track-II dialogues. IISA is the only think tank initiative that goes beyond national and regional inclinations and addresses strategic and socio-political issues/crises of the Islamic-world in its totality. For more information i.e. our mission statement, current programmes and our academic and regional expertise please visit the following links:

- **Website:** www.iisa.org.uk
- **Blog:** <http://iisablog.org/>
- **Twitter:** https://twitter.com/IISA_org
- **Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/pages/IISA-Institute-of-Islamic-Strategic-Socio-Political-Affairs/118608928247992?ref=hl>

References:

- 1 “ISIS in Libya kills senior cleric of rival group”, *Al-Arabiya*. Posted 14 August 2015 (<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/africa/2015/08/14/ISIS-in-Libya-kills-senior-cleric-of-rival-group.html>)
- 2 “Islamic State brutally crushes Sirte uprising”, *Middle East Eye*. Posted 14 August 2015 (<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/islamic-state-militants-step-reign-terror-massacre-libyan-town-1272577277>)
- 3 Reports suggest that anywhere between 20 to 300 residents were killed. Official UN numbers suggest 38 casualties, however it is unclear whether these casualties were purely civilian or if they included the resistance fighters, as well.
- 4 “Islamic State brutally suppresses the Ferjani uprising in Sirte”, *The World Weekly*. Posted 14 August 2015. (<http://www.theworldweekly.com/newswire/reader/islamic-state-brutally-suppresses-the-ferjani-uprising-in-sirte/4451/>)
- 5 “UN: Islamic State Uses Murder Against Libyan Dissenters”, *Voice of America*. Posted 18 August 2015. (<http://www.voanews.com/content/united-nations-says-islamic-state-uses-murder-against-libyan-dissenters/2922557.html>)
- 6 “Islamic State brutally crushes Sirte uprising”, *Middle East Eye*. Posted 15 August 2015. (<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/islamic-state-militants-step-reign-terror-massacre-libyan-town-1272577277>)
- 7 “Libya: Aodi, Sirte doctors forced to treat only ISIS wounded”, *Ansa-med*. Posted 17 August 2015. (http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/section/generalnews/2015/08/17/libya-aodi-sirte-doctors-forced-to-treat-only-isis-wounded_8819f34c-3794-44f8-a22e-38dddbbe6cb.html)
- 8 See: “ISIS Overwhelms Local Rebellion, Retakes Key Neighborhood in Sirte” (<https://medium.com/libya-security-monitor/isis-overwhelms-local-rebellion-retakes-key-neighborhood-in-sirte-2066b4b51af2>)
- 9 See: “Islamic State brutally crushes Sirte uprising” (<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/islamic-state-militants-step-reign-terror-massacre-libyan-town-1272577277>)
- 10 See previous link.
- 11 “No ammo to fight IS in central Libya”, *Middle East Eye*. Posted 5 June 2015. (<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/no-ammo-fight-central-libya-says-military-987933955>)
- 12 “Libya urges Arab states to bomb ISIS targets in Sirte”, *Reuters*. Posted 15 August 2015 (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/15/us-libya-security-idUSKCN0QK0MW20150815>)
- 13 “Arab League urges military support for Libya against ISIL”, *The National*. Posted 18 August 2015 (<http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/arab-league-urges-military-support-for-libya-against-isil>)
- 14 “World powers slam 'barbic' ISIS attacks in Libya”, *Al-Arabiya*. Posted 17 August 2015. (<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/08/17/U-S-other-nations-condemn-barbaric-is-acts-in-Libya.html>)
- 15 “Isis in Libya: British troops to be sent to north African country to combat militants advance”, *International Business Times*. Posted 1 August 2015 (<http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-libya-british-troops-be-sent-north-african-country-combat-militants-advance-1513681>)
- 16 “Arab League vows military support for Libya, no word on air strikes”, *Reuters*. Posted 18 August 2015.

(<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/18/us-libya-security-idUSKCN0QN1R420150818>)

17 “ISIS in Libya: Arab League considers military coalition following Sirte atrocities”, *International Business Times*. Posted 18 August 2015 ([http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-libya-arab-](http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-libya-arab-league-considers-military-coalition-following-sirte-atrocities-1515985)

[league-considers-military-coalition-following-sirte-atrocities-1515985](http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/18/us-libya-security-idUSKCN0QN1R420150818))

18 “Arab League agrees to create joint military force”, *BBC News*. Posted 29 March 2015 (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32106939>)