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ISIS gaining a toehold in Libya, experts say

11/27/2014

With Libya engulfed in chaos, the town of Derna in the east of the largely lawless country is emerging as a new stronghold for ISIS, experts say.

The North African state has been wracked by instability since the overthrow of autocratic leader Moammar Gadhafi in 2011, providing a fertile ground for Islamic extremists.

ISIS fighters have already swept across Iraq and Syria, and their leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi recently boasted of vows of allegiance from militants in Libya, Egypt, Algeria, Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

Some Western observers consider Derna, a town of 150,000, to be the home of a third ISIS franchise in North Africa, after Jund al-Khalifa in Algeria and Egypt's Ansar Beit al-Maqdis declared their support earlier this year.

"The Islamic State is in Derna. It's well documented. There's no doubt," said Othman Ben Sassi, a former member of the now-disbanded Transitional National Council, the political arm of the rebellion that overthrew Gadhafi.

The jihadi group is exploiting "the absence of state authority and porous borders," he added.

Statements and images have for several weeks circulated on extremist forums claiming to depict gatherings of “Libyan jihadis” belonging to the group – prompting concern in Washington.

“We have seen reports that violent extremists [in Libya] have pledged allegiance to ISIS and are looking to associate themselves with it,” State Department spokesman Jeffrey Rathke said.

Libyan authorities have struggled to control militant groups as well as powerful militias which ousted Gadhafi, and the internationally recognized government has been forced to take refuge in the far east of the oil-rich country.

Derna and large areas of Benghazi, Libya’s second city, have served as strongholds for radical groups including Ansar al-Shariah, classed by the U.N. as a terrorist organization.

In April, an offshoot of the group announced it had implemented Islamic Shariah law in Derna.

The self-proclaimed “Shura Council of Islamic Youth” has reportedly opened Islamic courts and established a religious police force in the town.

Dozens of masked members have appeared in military fatigues, regularly parading in pickup trucks brandishing rocket launchers and heavy machineguns and toting the black-and-white flag used by jihadis.

In August the Shura Council posted a video online appearing to show the public execution in a Derna football stadium of an Egyptian man accused of murder.

But the group has yet to formally pledge allegiance to ISIS, and analysts say there are divisions within its ranks.

“Several extremists in Derna are attracted to ISIS. But the majority of senior jihadis in Libya are former Al-Qaeda members and there is an ideological fight between ISIS and Al-Qaeda partisans,” said a Libyan expert on jihadis who did not want to be named.

The U.N. this month branded Ansar al-Shariah a terrorist organization owing to its affiliation with Al-Qaeda’s North African franchise.

“The decision was based on reliable intelligence,” the Libyan expert said. “Ansar al-Shariah has closer ties to Al-Qaeda than to any other group.”

According to Claudia Gazzini, Libya analyst at International Crisis Group, some Derna factions have pledged allegiance to ISIS, but it is unclear which ones and how much support they enjoy.

“There is a misguided tendency to automatically associate the establishment of Islamic courts and the killings of soldiers with an ISIS agenda,” she said.

Derna was already considered by many analysts to be a de-facto “Islamic emirate,” entirely free from state control, before the reported claims of allegiance to ISIS.

The town has long been suspected of harboring and training foreign fighters who then go on to fight in Iraq and Syria, where ISIS has declared a “caliphate” and imposed its harsh interpretation of Islamic law.

“There are factions in Derna who reportedly swore allegiance to ISIS in the search for a group that could unify the Muslim community,” said a former Libyan official who also asked not to be named for security reasons.

“But ideological differences between jihadi groups and the international coalition offensive against ISIS means these factions have so far opted for discretion, or have gone to fight in Iraq and Syria,” the former official added.

According to one resident of Derna, life in the town goes on largely as normal – for most people.

“You go out, you do your chores, you visit friends. No one bothers you,” the resident said.

“But if you are a policeman, a soldier or a lawyer, you’re dead.”