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## Descent into Chaos: ISIS in Libya

By Vijay Prashad  
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In early January, a truck bomb went off in the Libyan town of Zliten. The violence in Libya is at such a pitch that few would have noticed this story. “Libya” comes too often with words such as “violence”, “chaos”, “attack”, and “bombing”. The bombing took place at the old military base of al-Jahfal, now a police-training centre. At least 50 people were killed. The Islamic State (I.S.) did not directly claim responsibility, but its related media outlet, Aamaq, did so on its behalf. The I.S. claims a large tract of Libya, centred around its capital of Sirte, the home town of Muammar Qaddafi. That attack probably originated there.

In Iraq and Syria, the I.S. has been hit hard by air strikes and—at least in Iraq—by the weight of the Iraqi army and its allied militias. But in Libya, the I.S. feels relatively unthreatened. The various political factions are so divided, despite a United Nations push for unity, that they are most often at each other's throats instead of being bothered about the I.S. Jets from the United States have bombed Libya periodically to attempt to kill Al Qaeda and I.S. leaders. These strikes are illegal—they have not come with permission from any standing government. They have also been ineffective. The Italians and the British are eager to send in troops to Libya to battle the I.S. For that they require the creation of a government. That has been the U.N.'s task. It is unfinished.

Since 2011, good news out of Libya has been rare. Chaos has been the order of the day. Right after the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) bombing ended, the various militias on the ground that fought against the government of Qaddafi began to battle each other. Tensions remained high. Sections of those rebels who had Islamist backgrounds—many with roots in Al Qaeda—seized parts of the east to their advantage. Assassinations of human rights activists, journalists and liberal politicians became common. Fear stalked the country as gunfire became a familiar sound across the landscape. Oil production dropped and refugees rushed off towards the Italian island of Lampedusa for shelter.

“I would like to leave,” a reporter in Tripoli told this writer in 2013, “but where would I go? This is my country.” This was a common sentiment among those who could even imagine fleeing the country. Others, the vast mass, hoped for peace and normalcy. Many said, furtively, that they regretted the uprising of 2011. “At least it was peaceful then,” said a doctor who was less interested in politics and more invested in the well-being of the Libyan people. None of these people—at that time—felt comfortable being quoted. Retribution seemed around the corner. The lawyer Salwa Bugaighis, who spoke openly, was gunned down on June 25, 2014. In Bani Walid, its political leader Amina Mahmoud Takhtakh went underground when threatened by gunmen. These brave women refused to be silenced. One was killed, the other had to hide.

External powers intervened in the political life of Libya. The West backed sections of the Libyan parliament, members who fled to the eastern cities of Tobruk and Bayda where they set up their government. Meanwhile, in the capital Tripoli the Turkish-Qatari backed forces held fast. Libya now had two governments. But this was not enough. A rogue general, Khalifa Hifter, with a history that links him to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), began a war against various Islamist factions in the eastern city of Benghazi. He seemed to be backed by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It became hard even for those who watched Libya closely to keep track of the shifts and squabbles and the regional rivalries that seized the country. The two governments threatened to create central banks and oil Ministries of their own. Oil companies made links with both sides. Low oil prices in this period meant, however, that the companies were happy to wait out the crisis.

In mid-December 2015, the two Libyan governments and other political leaders met in Skhirat, Morocco, to sign a power-sharing agreement. This was one of those fleeting moments of hope. Divided between the cities of Tripoli and Tobruk, the two governments had refused to come to terms since September 2014. Bleakness ran through the country. Each government had external backers, equally unwilling to compromise for the sake of the country. The vacuum allowed various horrendous political forces to emerge, including the I.S. The U.N.'s power-sharing deal

suggested a way out of the trap, even though at the time people on both sides of the divide refused to countenance any agreement. The fact that the U.N. envoy Bernardino Leon had been negotiating with the UAE for a job while he seemed to let the advantage go to that country's proxies did not deter the hopefulness.

## **The Islamic State**

Into the disorder last year, from over the Tunisian-Libyan border and via the eastern provinces of Libya came fighters from outside the country and veterans of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and Ansar al-Shariah. They seized Sirte by May. These fighters were drawn to the I.S. by its audacity. Their own groups seemed petty in comparison with the grand designs of the I.S. In Derna, to the east, older entrenched extremism would have had to be uprooted for the I.S. to establish itself. Even in Sirte, authority figures, such as the Salafi cleric Khaled Ferjani, had to be killed. An uprising of Ferjani's followers against the I.S. was crushed in a few days in August 2015. Ferjani's mosque was renamed after Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian militant who founded Al Qaeda in Iraq, the ancestor of the I.S. That uprising and crackdown provided the I.S. with an excuse to remove all those who opposed it within the city. It also allowed some former Qaddafi followers to join up, not because they subscribed to the caliphate's ideology but because they saw it (as a source told this writer) as a way out of their isolation. It has been convenient to say that the I.S. in Sirte is made up of foreigners. This is not entirely the case. One of its most outspoken leaders is Hassan al-Karami, who comes from Benghazi and was involved there with Ansar al-Sharia.

The I.S. had not been able to take control of the oil installations that dot the Libyan coastline. During the last months of 2015, the I.S. attempted to destroy oil pumping stations in Mabruk, Dahra, Ghani, Bahi and elsewhere. Along with the attack in Zliten in early January came attacks on the oil ports of Es Sider and Ras Lanauf, both closed since December 2014. The I.S. blew up oil tanks at both installations, destroying thousands of barrels of crude oil. Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC) released a desperate message, "We are helpless and are not able to do anything against this deliberate destruction to the oil installations. NOC urges all faithful and honourable people of this homeland to hurry to rescue what is left of our resources before it is too late." This message was addressed to none in particular. There are few who can do anything about it.

NOC officials watched as the I.S. pushed against strategic towns along the desert fringe southeast of Sirte, opening a clear path for them to seize the main ports. The taking of Bin Jawad in early January sent the signal that the I.S. was ready to move towards the oil towns. Security staff for these fields have dispersed. The Petroleum Defence Guards was set up in 2012 by the government when it was unified. These guards have not been paid in months. Their morale is extraordinarily low. The Guards' leader, Ibrahim Jadhraan (whose brother is in the I.S.), has cleverly used the two governments to build up his own power. He is said to be involved in smuggling oil out of Libya. The I.S. and Jadhraan had earlier tried to create a deal over the control of oil. They were not successful then, but it is not implausible that they might come to an agreement at some point.

The black flags of the I.S. flutter on territory bombed not so long ago by NATO's jets. Libya has not recovered from that "humanitarian intervention". The U.N.'s new envoy, Martin Kobler, and the presidential council of the new Government of National Accord called for unity against the I.S. This is in the realm of rhetoric. Forty-eight billion barrels of oil are at stake. So is the future of Libya.