



How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb

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Executive Summary

The Islamic State (ISIS) is in sharp decline, but in its rout lie important lessons and lingering threats. This is true for the four countries of the Maghreb covered in this report, Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, which constitute a microcosm of ISIS' identity, trajectory and shifting fortunes to date. Those countries possess two unwanted claims to fame: as a significant pool of ISIS foreign fighters and, in the case of Libya, as the site of ISIS' first successful territorial conquest outside of Iraq and Syria. The pool is drying up, to a point, and the caliphate's Libyan province is no more. But many factors that enabled ISIS's ascent persist. While explaining the reasons for ISIS' performance in different theatres is inexact and risky science, there seems little question that ending Libya's anarchy and fragmentation; improving states' capacities to channel anger at elites' predatory behaviour and provide responsive governance; treading carefully when seeking to regiment religious discourse; and improving regional and international counter-terrorism cooperation would go a long way toward ensuring that success against ISIS is more than a fleeting moment.

Its operations in the Maghreb showcase ISIS's three principal functions: as a recruitment agency for militants willing to fight for its caliphate in Iraq and Syria; as a terrorist group mounting bloody attacks against civilians; and as a military organisation seeking to exert territorial control and governance functions. In this sense, and while ISIS does not consider the Maghreb its main arena for any of those three forms of activity, how it performed in the region, and how states reacted to its rise, tells us a lot about the organisation.

To much of the outside world, Tunisia is known equally for its relatively successful democratic transition as for the fact that it boasts the highest ratio per capita of people who have joined ISIS to fight outside their country. That dubious distinction has prompted head scratching, as has to a lesser extent ISIS's ability to recruit foreign fighters in neighbouring countries. As Crisis Group's earlier report on ISIS, *Exploiting Disorder*, laid out, reasons for ISIS' success in some arenas and failure in others defy generic explanations.

But its ability to recruit in these countries suggests a series of factors that gave rise to a more conducive environment: a demand for a quasi-revolutionary, anti-establishment discourse and practice, especially among young people who blame their relative deprivation on structural injustice (chiefly Tunisia); a security apparatus in disarray (Libya and Tunisia); the ascent and subsequent reining in of a more political, pragmatic form of Islamism (Tunisia); the presence of pre-existing networks of a jihadist or militant variety (Libya, Tunisia and Morocco); and either lack of regional or international coordination or, worse, regional actors backing rival groups (Libya). Progress has been made to address several of these matters, but not all, and almost certainly not in a sustainable manner.

Many of those same factors likewise would seem to explain ISIS' focus on Tunisia in carrying out several dramatic terrorist attacks in 2015-2016. Its propaganda emphasised perceptions of injustice shared by large swathes of the population – particularly those from marginalised regions and poor urban peripheries that most often encounter state brutality, corruption and social exclusion. ISIS also appeared

determined to disrupt the country's fragile and contested democratic transition, take advantage of the security forces' disorganisation and play on the feeling among some Islamists that the transition had betrayed their aspirations and that secular forces had forced upon political Islamists ignominious compromise.

Libya tells another, even more striking side of the story. There, the instability resulting from the uprising, the country's ensuing fragmentation, the struggle among powerful militias and competing interference by various regional actors produced an enabling context not only for recruitment, but even more so for ISIS' territorial expansion. Libya illustrated what Iraq and Syria proved: that jihadists' influence is more a product of instability than its primary driver. The fact that, with Western assistance, Libyan forces were able to oust ISIS from Sirte shows that superior military force can vanquish the organisation, a reality that has also been made evident in Mosul, Iraq, and will be soon in Raqqa, Syria. But that this was achieved without curing the problems that originally led to ISIS' emergence is reason to worry.

What's apparent from the Maghrebi experience is that state responses focused on security and military steps can work. ISIS essentially has been rolled back in Libya, and both Algeria's and Morocco's robust security services were able to contain its rise within their borders. But what's also apparent is that such responses only can go so far, and that the following other dimensions need equal attention:

- ❑ Resolving Libya's conflict or, at a minimum, diminishing the country's fragmentation, both to prevent ISIS remnants from regrouping inside the country or using it as a springboard to attack fragile states in the region.
- ❑ Increasing the capacity, and political willingness, of state elites to address local grievances and latent conflicts in inclusive ways in order to channel popular frustration away from violent options, especially in youth constituencies that feel that their poverty and marginalisation are a function of structural iniquities and self-enrichment by corrupt and brutal elites;
- ❑ Avoiding the temptation to over-regulate the religious sphere in an effort to combat jihadism; instead, allow for the expression of non-violent religious forms of contestation; and
- ❑ Ensuring greater regional and international counter-terrorism cooperation and, in the case of Libya in particular, halting the intense regional tug-of-war between Egypt and the UAE on the one hand, and Qatar and Turkey on the other.

Out of ISIS' likely defeat in the region and beyond will come some respite, but also new threats from the group's remnants. Previous waves of transnational jihadism, after all, mutated or lingered as manageable nuisances for many years until a new window of opportunity appeared. The Maghreb has shown that it has, for the most part, resilient state capacity but also persistent tensions within societies and their elites, as well as between them. It is also surrounded by fragile states to the south. Vigilance about avoiding a next wave requires more focus on appeasing and channeling these tensions away from violence, not just post-facto security approaches.

Rabat/Algiers/Tripoli/Tunis/Brussels, 24 July 2017

How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb

I. Introduction

From its inception in 2013, the Islamic State (ISIS) has both recruited widely from the Maghreb and sought to build a presence there in multiple ways, from the creation of recruitment and operational cells to seizing and governing territory.¹ In Libya, taking advantage of the anarchy and security vacuum created by conflict that started in mid-2014, it implemented the first extension of its territorialisation strategy outside of Iraq and Syria. In Tunisia, it has staged spectacular attacks aimed at undermining a democratic transition and made a failed attempt to seize control of territory. In western Tunisia and eastern Algeria, some of its affiliates, in some cases drawn from jihadists previously aligned with al-Qaeda, conduct low-level guerrilla warfare in hard-to-reach mountainous areas. In Morocco, it has tried but failed to carry out operations but recruited hundreds.

The relatively high numbers of Maghrebi fighters that have joined ISIS, particularly from Tunisia and Morocco, and its success in establishing itself in Libya, caused alarm in 2014-2015 that the group could further ensconce itself in the Maghreb and destabilise a region at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Since then, however, ISIS has suffered setbacks in both its core territory in the Levant and in the Maghreb, as regional states, a variety of sub-state actors and international powers confronted it. The challenge is now to take advantage of these setbacks, including the potential elimination of much of ISIS' leadership at local and global levels, to ensure that it is not given the opportunity to regroup or mutate into a new type of threat.

This report, based on Crisis Group's field work in the Maghreb since 2011 and more focused research from 2015 till now, seeks to place the evolution of ISIS in the region and the reaction to it in context, highlighting where the group came from, how it adapted to various local situations, and how effectively states and non-state actors reacted against it. It first assesses the phenomenon of Maghrebi foreign fighters joining ISIS outside their countries, then turns to ISIS' expansion in the Maghreb and the policies pursued by regional states to counter it. Finally, it suggests principles to consolidate achievements against ISIS and address some of the underlying violent conflicts or political and societal tensions that create an enabling environment for jihadist recruitment.

¹ For the purposes of this report, the Maghreb includes Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. Egypt and Mauritania are not covered.

II. Maghrebi Foreign Fighters in ISIS

A. *Putting a Number on Maghrebi Foreign Fighters*

Since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011, tens of thousands of individuals have travelled to join rebel groups in Syria.² Of these, an estimated 36,500 ended up joining the Islamic State (ISIS) and other jihadist groups once they imposed themselves as major actors in the conflict, particularly after 2013. Most of these foreign fighters are from the Arab world, and close to 8,000 from the four countries of the Maghreb (compared to 6,600 from Western countries) – although such numbers are estimates and thus inherently uncertain.³ Moreover, European countries with large immigrant populations of Maghrebi origin, such as France and Belgium, have also contributed high numbers of dual-nationality volunteers travelling to Syria especially and who, at some point in their trajectory, joined ISIS there.⁴ Maghrebi fighters have played an important role in the organisation, all the more remarkable given their home countries' relative distance from ISIS' chief theatre of conflict.

There are important variations among Maghreb countries. Tunisia has produced the highest ratio of foreign fighters per capita (6,000 individuals or 545 per million inhabitants, although this figure is likely exaggerated)⁵ of any country in the world, in both relative and absolute terms far more than both countries closer to ISIS' initial conflict theatre (Saudi Arabia, Russia, Turkey and Jordan, which contribute the largest numbers of foreign fighters to ISIS after Tunisia – around 2,000-2,500 each) and the other major sources of Maghrebi fighters, Morocco (1,623 individuals according to Moroccan authorities, or 46 per million inhabitants, plus an estimated 2,000 Moroccans who also hold a European citizenship) and Libya (an estimated 600 individuals, or 100 per million inhabitants). Algeria is a regional outlier, having contributed very few nationals (78 individuals or less than 2 per million inhabitants, although an additional 200 or so hold a second nationality and came from Europe).

² See "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community", testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee by Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, 9 February 2016.

³ The exact number of foreign fighters in ISIS is contested. This is in part because numbers have tended to remain static for long periods of time and do not seem to always reflect attrition rates and returnees, and in part because they likely include foreign fighters who have joined groups other than ISIS. This report uses official government figures, which generally tend to be validated by other sources, from intelligence agency estimates to academic analyses. Studies that have sought to determine the weight of different nationalities among foreign fighters in ISIS have tended to focus on necessarily limited, if substantial, data sets (ISIS administrative documents) that tend to confirm the picture given by governments. One such study suggests that Tunisia contributes 50.83 fighters per million citizens, compared to 18.74 for Saudi Arabia (the next highest figure), 13.90 for Libya, 7.08 for Morocco, and 1 for Algeria). See "The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail", Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton and Don Rassler, Combating Terrorism Center at Westpoint, April 2016. Crisis Group interviews, Libyan, Tunisian, Algerian and Moroccan officials and experts, Tripoli, Tunis, Algiers, Rabat, September 2016-February 2017.

⁴ See Alex P. Schmid and Judith Tinnes, "Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective", International Center for Counter-Terrorism, December 2015.

⁵ A Tunisian security official suggested the 6,000 number was initially claimed by his country's security services to secure Western support. Crisis Group interview, Tunis, February 2015.

These numbers are, at best, approximate, but have implanted themselves – particularly in the case of Tunisia – in media and official narrative as representing a particular problem for the Maghreb. Moreover, given these relatively small numbers, even in Tunisia, it is perilous to seek broad societal explanations when personal circumstances, intensity of ISIS efforts or some other factor might have played a part in attracting individuals to the organisation.

Bearing those caveats in mind, it nonetheless remains likely that levels of ISIS recruitment in a particular country reflect multiple factors: the political and security context; the presence of pre-existing jihadist networks; the level of demand for a quasi-revolutionary, anti-establishment discourse and practice; particular local histories, etc. In the context of the collapse of Libya's regime in 2011, the Libyan contribution to the foreign fighter phenomenon seems more understandable. Likewise, Tunisia's high numbers, while surprising, arguably reflect strong militant, anti-state sentiment, as well as a situation of genuine revolutionary upheaval combined with multiple forms of marginalisation and social exclusion.⁶

Morocco also presents somewhat of a surprise: despite a regime widely seen as legitimate by the population, a strong state in full control of its territory and a highly effective security sector, the number of its citizens who went to fight in Syria between 2011 and 2016 is greater than the total number of Moroccan foreign fighters since the first wave of Arab fighters to Afghanistan in the 1980s. Reasons remain unclear, though for some this suggests that the country's apparent stability obscures socio-economic frustration and a desire among a part of the population, of which those that travelled to Syria are a small subset, for political radicalism that can only be satisfied abroad.⁷

Algeria's very low number, however, is perhaps most surprising of all considering the country's history. An Algerian expert notes this anomaly, speculating it could be explained at least in part by a still-fresh national trauma:

Before, Algerians were in the lead compared to Moroccans and Tunisians – now for the first time they're the lowest. Confrontation with Islamist armed groups has been going on basically since 1992. 200,000 people have been killed. After 25 years of war, joining Islamist armed groups is not that attractive anymore. There has been an exhaustion of the extremist reservoir.⁸

For many observers, the reason for this low number is that the de-radicalisation strategies (together with ruthless policies to exterminate or drive away recalcitrant individuals) put in place when the Civil Concord was implemented after the end of the Islamist insurrection in 1999, including an amnesty for former members of Islamist groups that had fought the state, has worked (whatever negative effects it otherwise may have had).⁹

⁶ See Valentina Colombo, "Multiple Layers of Marginalization as a Paradigm of Tunisian Hotbeds of Jihadism", in *Jihadist Hotbeds: Understanding Local Radicalization Processes*, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 2016.

⁷ Crisis Group interview, researcher on Moroccan Islamists, Rabat, November 2016.

⁸ Crisis Group interview, Djallil Lounnas, academic, Algiers, September 2016.

⁹ Crisis Group interview, Yahia Zoubir, academic, Algiers, September 2016.

In accounting for the relative numbers of various nationalities in ISIS, it is also important to keep in mind that many recruits joined the group from Syria when it emerged in 2013, not from their home countries – ISIS’ recruitment was in good part done in a theatre of war, not at home, creating an important link between the foreign fighter phenomenon of 2011-2013 (when many states, Arab and Western, either supported, downplayed or ignored the phenomenon) and the 2013-2016 period of ISIS ascendancy.¹⁰ This occurred often *en masse*, because fighters from particular countries had already largely organised themselves into single-nationality brigades – such as Harakat al-Sham, a unit comprising some 800 Moroccans that provided already well-trained fighters to the group, or Katiba al-Battar al-Libi, a Libyan group.

B. *Push and Pull Factors for Foreign Fighters*

1. A market for revolutionary radicalism?

In the Maghreb as elsewhere, the emergence of ISIS spurred a second peak of departures for the Syrian (and now also Iraqi) arena after the initial one in 2011-2013.¹¹ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS’ self-styled caliph, plausibly could claim not only to have achieved spectacular military victories where many other representatives of Sunni communities in Iraq and (mostly Sunni) Syrian rebels had failed, but also to have communicated in a novel way. Videos recorded by Tunisian or Moroccan ISIS fighters extolling achievements of the “caliphate” and the rewards that awaited those who joined it played a role in attracting new recruits.¹² Even among jihadists there was something tantalising about both the medium and the message:

Zawahri’s videos are boring, whereas Baghdadi’s are inspiring. For ISIS supporters, Baghdadi is doing something concrete, controls territory, defies the entire world, unlike the old scholars of al-Qaeda who appear behind the times.¹³

In the Tunisian case, a regional counter-terrorism analyst evokes a desire for radicalism:

You have a great number of Tunisians because, having overthrown their own dictator, they think it’s their duty to do it [in Syria] – these are the modern Che Guevaras. It’s the same for the Libyans.¹⁴

According to this analysis, those disappointed with the meagre returns of the democratic transition (particularly economically) might have sought fame and fortune with the new group, keeping the early revolutionary flame of 2011 through a more

¹⁰ The creation of ISIS was formally announced in April 2013 by Omar al-Baghdadi as a merger of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Nusra Front, operating in Syria under the leadership of Abu Mohammed al-Julani. Julani rejected the merger and was backed by al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahri in the dispute in July 2013, resulting in a fallout and rivalry between al-Qaeda and ISIS that had global repercussions for jihadist groups.

¹¹ The number of foreign fighters in Syria is believed to have at least doubled between 2014 and 2015, largely because of the emergence of ISIS. See “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq”, The Soufan Group, 8 December 2015.

¹² Crisis Group interviews, researchers on ISIS, Rabat and Tunis, October-December 2016.

¹³ Crisis Group interview, David Thomson, journalist, Tunis, February 2016.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Algerian researcher on regional jihadism, Algiers, September 2016.

radical option than the prevailing mood of political compromise could offer. A similar pattern arguably took place in Morocco after the dissipation of the 20 February protest movement by the end of 2011, when a small number of its adherents, searching for an alternative, saw in ISIS a truly radical option that could prevail where reformism had failed.¹⁵

2. Security vacuums and favourable political contexts

The prevailing security disarray and the fall of the Ben Ali and Qadhafi regimes played an important role in permitting many individuals from Libya and Tunisia to go abroad, reaching higher numbers than previous waves of foreign fighters and drawing from a more sociologically diverse recruitment pool. The security apparatuses of both countries either collapsed or, for an extended period of time, largely were unable to function properly. Once-feared intelligence and security agencies lost the ability to monitor militant groups even as they emerged from the underground and sought to impose themselves as political (and in the case of Libya, also military) actors. State authority was weakened and the capacity to gather information and act on it was disrupted.

Even governments from countries that did not experience regime change preferred to see those inclined toward violence go abroad rather than stay home. Algeria and Morocco already had developed policies to deal with the jihadist movements in response to internal crises, albeit of different scopes – the devastating insurgency of the 1990s for Algeria and the 2003 Casablanca bombings for Morocco. They had had some success in either co-opting and “de-radicalising” jihadist Salafis or killing, imprisoning and driving into exile unrepentant ones. Security agencies were not weakened – indeed they had been strengthened in the preceding decades, especially in their understanding and even infiltration of jihadist groups.¹⁶

In Morocco, where the 20 February protest movement never seriously threatened a monarchy that had deftly, and rapidly, offered constitutional reforms, stabilising domestic politics – and if necessary exporting any jihadist threat – nonetheless was a priority. As a Moroccan participant in these protests who later became an ISIS supporter in prison put it:

At first, Arab countries permitted travelling, and several religious scholars issued *fatwas* permitting jihad in Syria. This helped youth to travel there because Arab states gambled on overthrow of the Assad regime as well as bringing all jihadists in one place to destroy all of them.¹⁷

¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, former 20 February movement member turned ISIS supporter, via Facebook, September 2016.

¹⁶ For a positive account of Morocco’s counter-terrorism efforts see Kei Nakagawa, El Mostafa Rezrazi, Shoji Matsumoto (eds.), *Le Livre gris du terrorisme: au cœur de la coopération sécuritaire Maroc-Europe* (Paris, 2015). Most experts on Morocco’s counter-terrorism strategy paint a far more nuanced picture, although Moroccan intelligence penetration of radical movements in the region and in Europe is widely recognised. Crisis Group interviews, Moroccan and European experts, September 2016-March 2017.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Moroccan ISIS supporter, via Facebook, September 2016. The idea that Morocco turned a blind eye to its nationals leaving to fight in Syria in 2011-2013 is also echoed by

In other words, the flipside of these security measures at times was turning a blind eye to those who sought jihad abroad, in the process getting rid of them and providing an outlet for the local Salafi-jihadist scene by giving them an opportunity to fight abroad.

At least for those countries that had experienced a change of regime, some analysts argue that a novel factor was the political influence of Islamists whose solidarity with the Syrian rebels (echoed by many Western capitals as well as Arab Gulf states) manifested itself far more openly than would have been conceivable under the fallen regimes. In Tunisia, for example, Ansar Sharia's recruitment was tolerated by the troika government (2011-2013) led by the Islamist party An-Nahda alongside the non-Islamist parties Ettakatol and Congrès pour la République.¹⁸ This happened notwithstanding their stated opposition to, and intellectual battles with, jihadists, giving some cover (either actively encouraging or looking the other way) to pre-ISIS foreign fighter recruitment networks. It likely contributed to mainstreaming elements of the jihadist narrative via the endorsement of the political and religious legitimacy of travelling to combat the Assad regime.¹⁹ Although the vast majority of Tunisian foreign fighters in Syria joined the rebel side (whether jihadist or non-jihadist), some also fought on the regime side – reflecting how Tunisians often projected the Syrian conflict onto a domestic canvas, as an extension of the Islamist/anti-Islamist polarisation experienced at home.²⁰

Recruitment of foreign fighters to various groups operating in Syria during this pre-ISIS period (carried especially by Salafi groups such as Ansar Sharia) also was facilitated by the Tunis embassies of countries backing the Syrian rebels as well as Gulf-financed religious charities.²¹ Investigations into the 2011-2013 period suggest that in Tunisia at least, local and international networks supporting the supply of foreign fighters to various Syrian groups (jihadist and non-jihadist) operated on a

experts on the Morocco Salafi milieu and European intelligence officials. Crisis Group interviews, Rabat, October 2016-March 2017.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, members of security forces, Tunis, 2015-2016; troika politicians, Tunis, 2013. In January 2017, after a debate prompted by civil society on the return of Tunisian jihadists from conflict zones, Tunisia's parliament voted to create of a commission of inquiry on the recruitment of jihadists. The commission, composed of 22 MPs, began its work in February 2017, with some MPs travelling to Syria for investigations and interviewing troika-era officials and ministers on the matter. Its work is politically controversial, particularly as it revives the common accusations by anti-Islamists that An-Nahda was in connivance with Ansar Sharia in 2011-2013. Some MPs from parties opposed to the governing coalition aligned themselves on the regional anti-Islamist axis led by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and sought to use the commission to revive anti-Islamist polarisation.

¹⁹ For instance, by sanctioning the idea of jihad against the Assad regime at a major gathering of (mostly Salafi) Islamists in Cairo in June 2013 – a call endorsed by the soon-to-be-overthrown Egyptian president, Mohammed Morsi. Many in the Salafi and jihadist milieu consider the Cairo event to have been an important official green light to go to Syria. Crisis Group interview, researcher on Islamists, Rabat, November 2016.

²⁰ The Mohammed Brahmi Brigade, an entirely Tunisian group named after the leftist politician assassinated by Ansar Sharia in July 2013, is incorporated into the pro-Assad Arab Nationalist Guard active in the greater Damascus area, for instance.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Tunis, 2015-2016. The president of the commission of inquiry on recruitment networks to conflict zones said in a radio interview that foreign countries were involved in helping recruits reach conflict zones. See "Héla Omrane: Des pays étrangers impliqués dans l'envoi des Tunisiens dans les zones de tension", *businessnews.com.tn*, 11 July 2017.

logistical level, facilitating the delivery of passports, subsidising travel costs, recruiting from prisons, etc.²² Given the absence of controls at Tunis' international airport, the fact that Tunisians (like Moroccans) did not need a visa to go to Turkey, and the low cost of financing the trip, reaching Syria was relatively easy. Although much of this type of recruitment ended in 2013 after the UN Security Council listed the Nusra Front as a terrorist organisation and the emergence of ISIS, it contributed to the large pool of Tunisian fighters present in Syria, many of whom ended up in ISIS.

3. Pre-existing networks and locales of radicalism

The individuals who initially sought to fight in Syria and ended up forming a “fourth wave” of transnational jihadist violence followed a trend established with the movement of fighters to Afghanistan and Iraq in earlier decades.²³ Often, veterans of these conflicts played a role in urging younger volunteers to make the same trip. Recruitment networks piggybacked on well-established, pre-existing Salafi-jihadist networks, but also localised nodes of militancy. These are often in historically marginalised areas with a history of dissidence and alienation from the central state, where the role of the informal or criminal economy is strong and the rule of law relatively weak.

Ansar Sharia, the most important Salafi-jihadist group to emerge in Tunisia after the 2011 uprisings, made use of the connections of its leader, Seifallah Ben Hassine (better known by his nom de guerre Abu Iyadh), a veteran jihadist with close ties to al-Qaeda leaders from his time in Afghanistan in the 1990s and who served as the former emir of the Tunisian Combatant Group. Abu Iyadh founded Ansar Sharia soon after he and many other jihadists were released from prison starting in January 2011, after the first post-Ben Ali government granted a series of amnesties. Indeed, as in Syria and Iraq, prisons were an important source of networking and recruitment in Morocco, Libya and Tunisia.²⁴

Like al-Qaeda-linked groups elsewhere, Ansar Sharia in Tunisia was initially selective in its recruitment: it required ten recommendations, did not promise compensation and recruits were expected to pay their own costs. It recruited largely on behalf of like-minded jihadist groups, generally affiliated with al-Qaeda – including

²² Crisis Group interview, researcher at Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies, Tunis, July 2013; Crisis Group interviews, security experts, journalists, Tunis, May 2017. Official efforts to look into jihadist recruitment in Tunisia has been curtailed, most recently by the dismissal of the head of the parliamentary commission tasked with investigating the phenomenon. See Rebecca Chaouch, “Tunisie – Leïla Chettaoui: ‘Depuis le début, la commission parlementaire sur les filières jihadistes dérange’”, *Jeune Afrique*, 29 May 2017.

²³ See Crisis Group Special Report, *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, 14 March 2016.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Moroccan and Tunisian officials, Libyan politicians, September–December 2016. In Tunisia, a number of jihadist detainees also escaped from prison on the night of Ben Ali's departure, especially from the Borj Erroumi prison in the northern city Bizerte and Borj El Amri prison in Manouba (also in the north). A few days later, several thousand detainees imprisoned on terrorism charges between 2003 and 2010 were released through a general amnesty. Many had experience in combat zones. These former detainees organised themselves into small discussion groups, recruiting young Tunisians (especially students and the unemployed from poor areas). Ansar Sharia appeared in May 2011 partly as a way to unite these discussion groups into a national network.

the Nusra Front (*jabhat an-nusra*). Given stringent screening, these recruits were “few in number but of high quality”.²⁵

Ansar Sharia (and similar groups) most easily could spread their message and seek recruits in the long-marginalised southern and interior provinces – for instance in towns such as Ben Guerdane, on the Libyan border, where the local economy is dominated by smuggling and state authority is relatively weak, or Sidi Bouzid, the interior town where the December 2010 protests began. Likewise, the poor urban periphery of major cities – whose inhabitants often are originally from the south and interior – is another important source of recruits.²⁶

It was not just groups such as Ansar Sharia that found it easy to operate in deprived neighbourhoods. Other, more diffuse streams of recruitment to Syria existed. After the 2011 uprising and the spike of illegal migration to Europe that accompanied it, criminal networks that specialised in facilitating it began to diversify their business, recruiting fighters for non-jihadist groups in Syria such as the al-Farouq Brigades (*kataib al-farouq*) and Descendants of Saladin Brigade (*liwa ahfad Salaheldin*) – both associated with the Free Syrian Army. These recruiters – who later developed links with some of the jihadist groups and arms smugglers operating in Tunisia – reportedly were paid \$3,000 per recruit.²⁷ In a sense, the closure of Europe and dwindling prospects there allowed Syria to emerge as another “market” for Tunisians seeking to improve their lot, a trend ISIS would later tap into.

In Libya, pre-existing jihadist groups and the areas in which they operated once again come to the fore. Detainees from groups such as the Libyan Islamist Fighting Group (LIFG, known locally as *al-jamaa al-libiya al-muqatila*), a jihadist group whose leadership comprises Afghanistan veterans from both the anti-Soviet jihad and Taliban periods, were released during the uprising. The mass release of prisoners during and after the 2011 uprising allowed a suppressed network of people inclined toward jihadism to re-emerge. This network played an important role in the overthrow of the Qadhafi regime, often building relationships with more moderate Islamists and non-Islamists in the crucible of the 2011 conflict that have lasted to this day.²⁸ Seized ISIS documents show that Derna, in eastern Libya, long a bastion of the LIFG and the site of a failed insurgency in the 1990s, is the major city of origin for Libyan

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Tunisian researcher on foreign fighters, Tunis, June 2013.

²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Tunisian security officials, lawyers for defendants in terrorism cases, Tunis, January 2016. Statistics on over 1,000 individuals convicted on terrorism charges between 2011 and 2016 show that Sidi Bouzid is the second largest town of origin of those convicted (138, after Tunis' 181, despite having a population of 127,000 compared to Tunis' 2,700,000). Even so, such statistics underplay the fact that most arrested in the greater Tunis area come from its periphery – in part because police concentrate their efforts in these areas rather than wealthier neighbourhoods of the capital. See *Le terrorisme en Tunisie à travers les dossiers judiciaires*, Centre Tunisien pour les Recherches et les Etudes sur le Terrorisme, Forum pour les droits économiques et sociaux (Tunis, 2016).

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Tunisian researcher on foreign fighters, Tunis, June 2013.

²⁸ This explains, for instance, why former LIFG leaders such as Abdelhakim Belhaj in Tripoli (who has distanced himself from jihadist groups) have forged alliances with non-Islamists there, or how the Benghazi Revolutionaries' Shura Council united opponents of General Khalifa Haftar's Operation Dignity, from jihadists to mainstream Islamists to non-Islamists.

foreign fighters.²⁹ Likewise, other areas with a history of jihadist activity – such as Ajdabiya, Benghazi and Nawfiliyya – became prime recruitment nodes for foreign fighters and, later, hubs for ISIS activity.

Well-established networks of Moroccans who previously had fought in Afghanistan or Iraq urged young men to follow in their footsteps, recruiting a new generation of foreign fighters. Members of the Joint committee of defence of Islamist detainees (CCDDI, Coordination commune pour la défense des détenus islamistes) – an advocacy group created by Salafi and former jihadist detainees imprisoned in the 2000s – was for instance instrumental in building a network of recruitment for those who want to travel to Syria. Some of its members – especially veteran fighters of Afghanistan or Iraq – were active in recruiting young foreign fighters.³⁰

An ISIS supporter who was imprisoned for attempting to join the group noted that he had been inspired by previous generations of foreign fighters, seeing it as part of tradition of participation in righteous causes:

The first group travelled to Syria to support oppressed people after they witnessed the carnage committed by Bashar al-Assad against his own people. The main difference between those that went to Afghanistan in the 1980s and the new generation is that [the latter] are more passionate, and many are only recently reborn to religion.³¹

The role of pre-existing jihadist groups is one reason recruitment was initially particularly strong in the north of the country: among prominent Moroccan foreign fighters in ISIS, many come from northern towns such as Tangier, Tetouan, Fnideq, or al-Hoceima.³² The region – a predominantly Amazigh (Berber) area named after the Rif mountain chain – has a history of jihadist activity as well as of neglect and anti-state contestation.³³ The northern cities also had established salafi-jihadi

²⁹ See Nate Rosenblatt, “All Jihad is local: What ISIS’ files tell us about its fighters”, *International Security*, July 2016.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, CCDDI members, Rabat, 2013-2014. See also Jules Cretois, “Les salafistes marocains, une voix qui veut compter dans le paysage politique”, *Middle East Eye*, 30 December 2016.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, Moroccan ISIS supporter, via Facebook, September 2016.

³² Among the better-known Moroccan members of ISIS, this is the case of Mohammed Abu al-Baraa al-Maghribi (Tetouan, died August 2014), Abu Anas al-Andalusi (Fnideq), Abu Osama al-Maghribi (Fnideq, died March 2014). Their identities were established through ISIS propaganda videos and eulogies collected by Crisis Group from jihadi forums. See also Aziz al-Driyoushi, “من أحياء المغرب، المممشة إلى أشرس مقاتلي داعش”, *Deutsche Welle Arabic*, 27 July 2014. The case for the Rif playing a particular role in the modern jihadist movement can also be exaggerated, however. See Leela Jacinto, “Morocco’s outlaw country is the heartland of global terrorism”, *Foreign Policy*, 7 April 2016; Mohammed Chtatou, “Morocco’s Rif region is not an outlaw country and certainly not the heartland of global terrorism”, *Morocco World News*, 20 April 2016; Mohamed Daadaoui, “In defense of the Rif and the pitfalls of parachute journalism”, *Huffington Post*, 11 August 2016.

³³ The Rif was a front line of resistance to Spanish colonisation in the early 20th century (Spain retains the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla there); was long neglected by central authorities, particularly under the reign of King Hassan II; is the centre of Morocco’s cannabis cultivation and trafficking; has a thriving contraband economy; and continues to be an area of frequent contestation against central authorities: since November 2016, regular protests for greater investment in the region and against human rights violation have evolved into an important movement, *hirak*, that has united

groups. For instance, Sheikh Omar al-Hadouchi and Sheikh Mohamed al-Fizazi – prominent Salafi preachers – have been active in spreading jihadist ideology in this region since the late 1990s.

Even so, regional origins diversified after ISIS' emergence, a sign of its ability to appeal beyond pre-existing jihadist networks. The recruitment cells that operated were far less likely to be associated with al-Qaeda – for one Moroccan analyst, “it is as if after 2014 al-Qaeda disappeared and is replaced by ISIS”.³⁴ The proliferation of new, smaller cells suggests new jihadist activity rather than the extension of pre-existing networks, as had tended to be the case in 2011-2013. A similar pattern could be seen elsewhere – for instance in Tunisia, where the ISIS label briefly acquired a certain glamour among urban youth. The lack of requirement of religious knowledge or known practice of piety by ISIS recruiters also made the group more accessible, less “elitist” than pre-existing, al-Qaeda-oriented, groups.³⁵

The link between regional marginalisation, poverty, state neglect, petty criminality and jihadist recruitment is not straightforward or direct.³⁶ However, those factors can create an enabling environment that can facilitate recruitment, particularly if socio-economic conditions are perceived to be a result of structural injustice. Poverty in absolute terms, in other words, does not correlate with the propensity to join a jihadist group – but the perception of relative poverty, interpreted as the result of a political choice or historic injustice, often does.

It is striking that many of the areas of the Maghreb that have provided above-average number of foreign fighters to ISIS share some commonalities, including a perception of relative deprivation and a history of state violence or marginalisation, and are ongoing sites of political contestation. That last factor – the existence of political contestation – is key and differentiates these areas from others, which may suffer similar levels of marginalisation but have not articulated an anti-state (or anti-central government) political narrative around it. Northern Morocco, southern Tunisia and parts of eastern Libya share such features. In other words, much as conflict zones provide ideal conditions for recruitment to jihadist groups, areas where a deep-seated, even if latent, political conflict exists helps to pre-dispose inhabitants toward such revolutionary causes.

activists of various ideologies together. See “Governor sacked as new violence hits Morocco province”, *The New Arab* (alaraby.co.uk), 30 March 2017.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Moroccan counter-terrorism analyst, security officials, Rabat, January-February 2017.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, young men, security officials, Tunis and Tunis suburbs, 2014-2016. The view that ISIS is “less elitist” was also echoed in Algeria and Morocco. Crisis Group interview, counter-terrorism officials, researchers, Algiers and Rabat, September-December 2016.

³⁶ “As there are more poor people in these areas, it’s normal that we find more jihadists there”, notes a Tunisian security official about southern provinces. “But we should not forget that many come from well-to-do, educated backgrounds”. Crisis Group interview, former senior security official, Tunis, February 2016.

III. ISIS Targets the Maghreb

Beyond its role in recruiting fighters for battle in Syria, ISIS and its affiliates have carried out operations in a variety of ways, ranging from the capture and governance of territory in Libya, to operating a guerrilla group in mountainous areas in Algeria and Tunisia or simply as an underground presence in Morocco. In all of these countries, ISIS-affiliated groups have planned attacks targeting civilians, although it has yet to succeed in carrying any out in Morocco. They also adapted their approach to distinct political contexts: in Tunisia, for example, ISIS affiliates sought to disrupt the transition, exploiting dissatisfaction with its pace and direction; in Libya, they used the opportunity of war and chaos to seize territory. The following sections describe ISIS' presence and tactics in the four Maghrebi countries.

A. *Libya: the Beachhead*

If the foreign fighter phenomenon was the first vector that connected Maghreb countries to the emergence of ISIS, the latter's decision to target Libya as its first major area of expansion outside of Iraq and Syria demonstrated a clear intention to widen its caliphate to North Africa. In a January 2015 essay disseminated online, an ISIS supporter claiming to be in Libya wrote:

As well as the harmonious social makeup of Libya, and the fact that 99 per cent of [its population] is made up of Maliki Sunnis – aside from the Ibadhia minority – by the grace of God to Libya, God bestowed upon this country a strategic position and immense potential. These are things from which it would be possible to derive great benefits if they were efficiently exploited. Unfortunately, some supporters do not recognise the extent of the Libyan arena, the proliferation of variant weaponry within it, its geographic dimensions and its critical environs. Sufficed to say, Libya looks upon the sea, the desert, mountains, and six states: Egypt, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Algeria and Tunisia.³⁷

Crucial to the ability of ISIS' strategy to expand in Libya, at least after mid-2014, were the divisions between rival governments and parliaments. The General National Congress (the parliament elected in July 2012) and its Government of National Salvation in Tripoli on the one hand, and the House of Representatives (the parliament elected in June 2014) and its government in al-Bayda on the other, competed for recognition as the internationally-recognised government after August 2014. Neither parliament was backed by all of its own members. UN-led efforts at reconciling the two resulted in the Libyan Political Agreement of 17 December 2015, which created a Presidency Council, a nine-member rump executive tasked with forming a Government of National Accord.

The Presidency Council began to operate out of Tripoli starting from late March 2015, although the government it appointed has still not been accepted by the House of Representatives as required per the agreement. This competition between rival

³⁷ Charlie Winter, "Libya: The Strategic Gateway for the Islamic State", Translation and analysis of IS recruitment propaganda for Libya", Quilliam Foundation, February 2015.

governments – none of which have much actual ability to effectively govern – created an opening in which ISIS’ claim to deliver some of the trappings of a state (or at least, a form of basic governance) filled a vacuum, especially in areas effectively abandoned by all governments.

1. Derna and Benghazi

The move toward expansion in Libya had begun earlier. Members of the Battar Brigade, a Libyan-only group that had been fighting in Syria since 2012 and joined ISIS there in 2013, began to return to Libya in 2014. They primarily went to Derna, at the time in the hands of a variety of Islamist groups, some of them jihadist, including Ansar Sharia. The Battar Brigade members, together with local jihadists, formed the Islamic Youth Shura Council and, in June 2014, pledged allegiance to ISIS.³⁸ This effort was led by an experienced Iraqi ISIS operative, Abu Mughirah al-Qahtani (alias Abu Nabil al-Anbari), who recruited from Ansar Sharia and other pre-existing groups as well as foreign fighters who had come to Libya for training on their way to Syria.

As the emerging Libyan branch of ISIS sought to impose itself in Derna – the Libyan city with the oldest history of jihadism – it met with resistance from rival jihadist groups with informal connections to al-Qaeda, as well as non-jihadist militias grouped under the banner of Shura Council of Derna Revolutionaries. Although the Islamic Youth Shura Council and the Shura Council of Derna Revolutionaries shared some common aims at the local level – particularly implementation of Sharia through the creation of Islamic courts – they clashed over the fundamental point of whom they should pay allegiance to, with the latter’s members refusing to recognise any caliphate outside of Libya and remaining within a national rather than transnational, framework. By summer 2015, in a tactical alliance with dissident officers from the Libyan National Army (dominant in eastern Libya), the Shura Council of Derna Revolutionaries defeated the Islamic Youth Shura Council (by now dominated by ISIS) and drove it out of Derna and continued to fight against them in the nearby countryside.

Separately, as early as 2013, Derna-based jihadists had begun to plan the expansion of a network that would spread to Benghazi, Sirte and Sabratha – towns that would become major hubs of ISIS activity in the years that followed.³⁹ The evolution of ISIS in Libya took place in the context of various groups’ fluid identities and boundaries. Ansar Sharia played a key role in this process as the chief channel through which ISIS would spread, in what, rather than a merger, could be described as a strategy – which yielded varying degrees of success – of infiltration and takeover by ISIS operatives who had returned from Syria.

The transition of some Ansar Sharia branches into ISIS occurred gradually starting in 2014, often at different paces depending on locale. It initially was contested in Derna and Benghazi, with elements of Ansar Sharia refusing to pledge allegiance to ISIS – reflecting Ansar Sharia’s more pragmatic approach, including its close collab-

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Derna residents, June-December 2014.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Derna residents and activists, 2013.

oration with other groups, including non-Islamists.⁴⁰ The Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries, created in June 2014 to counter forces under General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army that had vowed to take control of Benghazi, was an example of such an alliance: it gathered Ansar Sharia (believed to be involved in a string of high-profile assassinations in the city between 2012 and 2014) alongside other armed groups (both Islamist and non-Islamist) that emerged in 2011. Ansar Sharia Benghazi's leader, Muhammad Ali al-Zahawi, was also a leader of this council and known to be resistant to the push to declare allegiance to ISIS. His death in January 2015 (some analysts and individuals close to Ansar Sharia believe ISIS assassinated him)⁴¹ allowed the pro-ISIS faction to gain dominance over Ansar Sharia, eventually effectively subsuming it.⁴²

This fluidity of the Islamist and *thuwwar* (revolutionary) scene would later allow Haftar to claim that he was leading the fight against ISIS in Benghazi – and tarnish his opponents in the city with a jihadist brush. Indeed, ISIS' strategy of infiltrating or piggybacking on pre-existing Islamist (and even non-Islamist) groups, has been one factor that enabled Haftar to make the blanket claim that all Islamists were a threat, a claim that has gained currency among many Libyans and is echoed by anti-Islamist rhetoric elsewhere in the wider region.⁴³

2. Sirte

By early 2015, the emerging Libyan branch of ISIS was focusing its efforts chiefly on Sirte and its environs – indeed its first major public act was the execution of 21 Egyptian Christians in January 2015 on a beach near Sirte, followed by multiple recruitment videos in the ensuing months.⁴⁴ In Sirte too, its emergence through pre-existing groups – at first the Supreme Security Committee, then Ansar Sharia – was gradual and obscured the ambition to establish a branch of ISIS.⁴⁵ The General National Congress (GNC), the parliament elected in 2012, downplayed the concern of Sirte residents who saw the growing strength of militant forces in their city, often because the various groups that had taken control of Sirte in 2011 were GNC allies. As a result, the GNC preferred to look the other way.⁴⁶ As an official in Operation

⁴⁰ In 2013, a military officer could still speak of Ansar Sharia members as wayward boys rather than extremists, advising dialogue with them rather than confrontation. Crisis Group interview, military officer, Tobruk, September 2013.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, expert on Libyan Islamists, Brussels, July 2017.

⁴² See Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Rise and Decline of Ansar al-Sharia in Libya", Hudson Institute, 6 April 2015.

⁴³ Haftar habitually conflates his Islamist political opponents, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, with jihadist groups. See for instance "I want to cleanse Libya of Muslim Brotherhood: Haftar", *Ahram Online*, 20 May 2014. More recently, the eastern government based in al-Bayda, which backs Haftar, echoed the anti-Brotherhood rhetoric of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and lauded the inclusion of several Libyan Islamists on a list of terrorists allegedly backed by Qatar issued by these countries in June 2017. See "Ghariani, Belhaj, Sallabi and BDB on Saudi terror list", *Libya Herald*, 9 June 2017.

⁴⁴ See Jason Pack, Rhiannon Smith, and Karim Mezran, *The Origins and Evolution of ISIS in Libya*, Atlantic Council, June 2017, pp. 22-23.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Sirte and Ben Jawwad residents, Misrata and Ben Jawwad, October 2016.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, GNC politicians, Tripoli, 2015. See also Issandr El Amrani, "How much of Libya does the Islamic State control?", *foreignpolicy.com*, 18 February 2016.

Bunyan Marsous – the Misratan-led effort to retake Sirte from ISIS in 2016-2017, carried out under the aegis of the UN-recognised Tripoli government and with international support – put it, “ISIS took advantage of the absence of the state and the rivalry among the three governments. They were able to enter Sirte with the help of key people in Ansar Sharia”.⁴⁷

The fact that, after rebel groups defeated the Qadhafi regime in Sirte, the city essentially was neglected and ungoverned is one reason why some of its residents often initially welcomed hard-line Islamist groups that were ISIS’ precursors, even if they imposed stringent rules or espoused a jihadist discourse. Local authorities were dismantled, creating insecurity. Militias that initially took control of the city (mostly coming from Misrata) had poor relations with locals. In this context, more militant groups held out the promise of stability:

From 2012 they started raising the black flag. They controlled mosques, had money, mediated reconciliation – in fact they had no problem with the people, they were liked. We had no police, no army, no state institutions.⁴⁸

Residents of Sirte and the surrounding towns that came to be controlled by ISIS confirm that the lack of security forces enjoying good relations with locals greatly contributed to the ease with which they fell. In many cases, these places simply surrendered to ISIS or negotiated its entry (sometimes in exchange for the release of captives) because they saw little alternative.⁴⁹ And because ISIS forces did not exact punitive measures on locals at first – not until at least mid-2015, after ISIS envoys dispatched from Iraq and Syria came to Sirte and applied the harsh regulations in place in Raqqa and Mosul⁵⁰ – no organised resistance to the group manifested itself until ISIS secured control of the city and began to implement more drastic measures.⁵¹

Officials from the competing governments of the east and west for the most part failed to do anything about the situation in Sirte until it was too late.⁵² This was in

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Reda Issa, spokesman for Operation Bunyan Marsous, Misrata, October 2016.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, member of Sirte local council, Misrata, October 2016.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, resident of Nawfiliya (near Sirte), via telephone, February 2016.

⁵⁰ Some of the men who reportedly lead ISIS in Libya are believed to be foreign: Abu Mugir al-Qahtani (aka Abu Nabil al-Anbari), an Iraqi, had been the “governor” of Salahadeen province in Iraq, north of Baghdad. He was killed in November 2015 in a U.S. airstrike in Derna. Abdel Qadr al-Najdi, a Saudi, had a prominent role in 2015 and read out the group’s statement of allegiance to ISIS in Sirte. Jalal al-Din al-Tunsi, a Tunisian, is believed to have taken over in late 2016 and likely died when in the fighting to liberate Sirte. Moez Fezzani (aka Abu Nasim), believed to lead the ISIS cell in Sabratha in western Libya, is a Tunisian. Crisis Group interviews, journalists, politicians, military officials, Tripoli, Misrata and Rome, October–December 2016.

⁵¹ Measures implemented by ISIS included compulsory propaganda classes, public hangings and stoning of dissidents and persons deemed to be acting against religious mores (including alleged prostitutes and adulterers). In one case, a young man was executed by being thrown from the roof of the highest building in Ben Jawwad after being accused of homosexuality; residents were forced to watch this and most other executions. Crisis Group interviews, Ben Jawwad residents, October 2016.

⁵² “Until March 2015 life was normal in Sirte. There were ISIS militants but they did not control the whole city because some Misratans were still there. After that, they began targeting anybody who was a policeman, a lawyer or military – these had to be killed. And they started physical punishments in the square”. Crisis Group interview, member of Sirte local council, Misrata, October 2016.

part because they did not take the situation seriously enough and tended to believe in conspiracy theories about ISIS' appearance in Sirte (each believing that ISIS was a creation of its rival), and in part because few wanted to fight for Sirte, a bastion of Qadhafi loyalists. Misrata, the military force closest to Sirte, knew of the changes in the area in late 2014 and early 2015 – at the time they had launched an offensive to take control of oil facilities in the Gulf of Sirte whose operation centre was only a few kilometres from an ISIS base in Nawfliyya – but had other priorities. Besides, Misrata had withdrawn from Sirte partly based on the assessment that it should not confront ISIS unless the Government of National Salvation it backed secured international recognition.

Sirte's association with the former regime – it is Muammar al-Qadhafi's birthplace – caused many to speculate that some of its members formed the core of ISIS. This is unconvincing: while members of local tribes associated with Qadhafi joined the group, as did some Qadhafi-era officials, many also resisted it and many recruits appear to have come from anti-Qadhafi groups.⁵³ ISIS offered the opportunity for loyalists – generally shunned post-2011 – to assume a new identity, and the group may have had an initial popularity among Sirte residents who had lost status after the regime's fall. But so did other ultraconservative groups that are less radical and now on the ascent, such as Madkhali Salafis (followers of an influential Saudi strand of Salafism). The comparison with Iraq, where former Baathists provided ISIS with local knowledge and networks, remains superficial, particularly, according to Libyan and international security officials, as the bulk of the rank-and-file and key leaders of ISIS in Libya were non-Libyan.⁵⁴

Once firmly established in Sirte (after the suppression of the August 2015 insurrection against its rule), ISIS focused on three modes of operation. First, it expanded slowly in the Gulf of Sirte, eventually controlling over 100km of the coastline to the east of the city and extending its control over major crossroads to the west, toward Misrata, and targeting infrastructure such as power and water stations. This included attacks on oil wells in the “oil crescent” south-east of Sirte, aimed at depriving the government of income rather than taking control of oil production facilities.⁵⁵ Having established this safe zone in which to operate, ISIS increased its membership in Libya,

In August 2015, ISIS crushed an uprising after the killing of a locally prominent Salafi preacher from the Ferjana tribe. Neither of the competing governments of Libya, despite claims that they would “liberate Sirte”, responded beyond a few airstrikes. See Jared Malsin, “ISIS re-establish their hold on Qaddafi's home town after crushing a rebellion”, *Time*, 19 August 2015.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Bunyan Marsous commanders, Misrata, October 2016. A member of Sirte's municipal council said: “When the assassination campaign started at first we thought it was the *azlam* (remnants the Qadhafi regime) but then realised both *azlam* and pro-17 February revolution were being killed. At the beginning there was some support for ISIS by the *azlam* because they considered it a form of resistance against the 17 February forces, but they grew disaffected”. Crisis Group interview, member of Sirte municipal council, Misrata, October 2016. Moreover, in the towns they controlled ISIS affiliates also persecuted many relatives of Qadhafi-era military officers because of their affiliation to the old regime, which they considered apostate. Crisis Group interviews, Ben Jawwad residents, Ben Jawwad, October 2016.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Sirte residents and Libyan intelligence officials, Misrata, October 2016; European intelligence official, location withheld, May 2017.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, residents of Sirte, Ben Jawwad, Nawfliyya and Ras Lanuf, October 2016.

which skyrocketed to some 4-6,000 by 2016 according to Western intelligence estimates, which now appear inflated.⁵⁶

Second, it continued attacks in western Libya aimed at destabilising political and military actors there – especially Misrata – and also continued fighting the LNA in Benghazi.⁵⁷ It also extended its influence in Sabratha, in the west, at least until the U.S. bombed a training camp on 19 February 2016, killing dozens of mostly Tunisian ISIS fighters believed to be involved in attacks in Tunisia.⁵⁸

Third, benefiting from its polished propaganda machine, ISIS sought new recruits by depicting itself as a military force superior to militias and condemning both Libyan governments as apostates or agents of the West. Its overall plan, aside from strengthening its military capacity, appeared to have been to weaken the rival governments and more generally sow chaos – in other words, causing disorder it could later exploit. That the rival governments and the main military coalitions aligned with each viewed each other as a graver threat than ISIS, allowed ISIS to continue unhindered for some eighteen months between early 2015 and mid-2016, during which time only targeted U.S. airstrikes (in Derna, Ajdabiya and Sabratha) dealt it some setbacks.⁵⁹

3. Efforts against ISIS in Libya

The urgency, felt most acutely by Western powers, of combating ISIS' growth in Libya (amplified by ISIS propaganda and attacks in Tunisia that were linked to Libya) was a chief motivation underpinning their support for the Libyan Political Agreement of 17 December 2015. Although there was insufficient Libyan consensus behind the agreement, many hoped that it would enable a united government to take the lead in combating ISIS and call for broader international support. However, as Libya's divisions undermined the fledgling Government of National Accord created by the agreement, separate actions against ISIS were pursued.⁶⁰

In the east, counter-ISIS activity focused on Benghazi, where General Haftar's Libyan National Army has fought the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries – a

⁵⁶ See "Department of Defense Briefing by Gen. David M. Rodriguez", U.S. Department of Defense, April 2016. Crisis Group warned about a tendency toward number inflation at that time, estimating that a lower figure – 2-3,000 fighters – was more realistic. See Issandr El Amrani, "How much of Libya does the Islamic State control?", *foreignpolicy.com*, 18 February 2016.

⁵⁷ The first attack suspected of being conducted by ISIS in western Libya was against the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli on 27 January 2015, in which ten people died, including five foreigners. The most significant was against barracks used by Misratan forces in Zliten on 7 January 2016, in which at least 50 soldiers were killed. ISIS also carried out a series of smaller attacks on checkpoints in western Libya, ostensibly to weaken Misratan control of roads leading to Sirte.

⁵⁸ The strike on Sabratha targeted Nouredine Chouchane (aka Sabir), a Tunisian national believed to have masterminded the March 2015 attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunis. See Terri Moon Cronk, "Strike on ISIL Camp Protected National Security, Pentagon Press Secretary Says", U.S. Department of Defence News, 19 February 2016.

⁵⁹ Some military units from Misrata initially sought to contain ISIS' expansion in Sirte but eventually withdrew from the city's outskirts when they failed to get more support.

⁶⁰ See "Statement on a Political Deal for Libya", Crisis Group, 12 December 2015; Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°170, *The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset*, 4 November 2016.

diverse grouping of Islamists and non-Islamists that made tactical alliances with Ansar Sharia and later ISIS. The LNA ultimately claimed to have driven most Shura Council combatants out of the city in early 2017, with some external support. These operations – labelled Operation Dignity – came at great civilian cost, and human rights groups allege the LNA committed war crimes against members of the Shura Council.⁶¹ Haftar’s banding together of all of his opponents under the ISIS label was both inaccurate and deeply divisive, worsening local fractures in Benghazi and driving groups that could be amenable to a negotiated peace toward extremes.⁶²

In the centre of the country, a coalition of militias mostly from Misrata led Operation Bunyan Marsous to liberate Sirte. The coalition fell under the newly formed Presidency Council’s nominal leadership, although it effectively operated independently, coordinating with U.S., UK and Italian partners.⁶³ While both the Dignity and Bunyan Marsous forces combatted ISIS in part because they felt directly threatened by the group, gaining international support was a critical motivation too: each side presented itself as a privileged counter-terrorism partner.

Bunyan Marsous – which lasted from June to December 2016 – succeeded at great cost to the forces involved: 771 fighters died and over 4,000 were wounded. Casualties mostly were from Misrata, whose units conducted most of the ground fighting.⁶⁴ U.S. air support was fundamental to success, particularly as Misrata lacks significant ability to carry out precision airstrikes. But the operation, while sending a strong political signal by being Libyan-led, highlighted the limits of most militias’ capacities: many lives were unnecessarily lost through negligence and poor planning for the guerrilla tactics ISIS deployed in its defence: booby-traps, suicide bombings, vehicle-borne bombs, etc.⁶⁵

How sustainable is the situation in Sirte is another question. Post-ISIS circumstances are tense: Misratan groups remain dominant but are contested and local

⁶¹ See “Evidence points to war crimes by Libyan National Army forces”, Amnesty International, 23 March 2017.

⁶² The debate over the Benghazi Defence Brigades (BDB), composed mostly of fighters formerly with the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries who were driven out of the city, is a case in point. In partnership with allies in western Libya, including supporters of the UN-backed Government of National Accord, the BDB, which the pro-Haftar eastern government accuses of jihadist sympathies, conducted multiple attacks on the LNA in central and southern Libya as part of its effort to return east. On 20 May 2017, it participated in an attack on an LNA-controlled airbase at Brak Shati, in the south, in which over 80 persons were killed, including civilians. Officials from the eastern government say that the BDB includes pro-ISIS and al-Qaeda fighters. Crisis Group interview, Mohammed Dayri, foreign minister of the interim government based in al-Bayda, Brussels, February 2017.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, Bunyan Marsous officials, Misrata and Sirte environs, July-September 2016. Western officials, especially from the U.S., were pushing for Misrata – as the most effective land force in Libya – to take the lead against ISIS. “The Misratans are going to be the Kurds of Libya”. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, March 2016.

⁶⁴ “Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Support Mission in Libya”, United Nations, 4 April 2017.

⁶⁵ “We did not think the war in Sirte would be this violent, that they would be equipped with tanks, heavy machine guns, mines, tripwires or use suicide bombers. Half of the Bunyan Marsous fighters who died were killed by IEDs and suicide attacks that caused 25-30 deaths at a time. Nobody wants more war, we’re fed up”. Crisis Group interview, Misratan brigade commander, Misrata, October 2016.

community leaders likely will want their withdrawal at some point;⁶⁶ the Misratan forces that took part in Bunyan Marsous also are being drawn elsewhere and they themselves are divided in their loyalties;⁶⁷ finally, poor planning for the aftermath of ISIS' defeat in Sirte has left demining and reconstruction efforts lagging behind – never mind more comprehensive programs to deal with the trauma the city's residents suffered and the reintegration and rehabilitation that local ISIS fellow travellers that melted back into the population should be receiving. A post-conflict plan for the city also remains “in need of resources”, according to the UN.⁶⁸ As of mid-2017, ISIS militants have carried out at least three attacks in the areas south of Sirte.

4. ISIS after Sirte

Prior to Operation Bunyan Marsous, an estimated 6,000 ISIS members were thought to be in the Sirte area, half of them fighters and the other half in charge of logistics. Yet less than 2,000 of its members are estimated to have been killed, suggesting that either these estimates were inflated or many managed to escape. That said, information garnered from bodies taken to morgues and from ISIS documents recovered in Sirte suggest that the vast majority of ISIS members in Sirte were not Libyan.⁶⁹

Among those who escaped, many are believed to still be in Libya, moving in small groups and concentrating in the desert south-west of Sirte, near towns that also were Qadhafist strongholds such as Bani Walid, near Uweinat in the south east, and in Sabratha in the west, as well as across the south.⁷⁰ Some foreigners have headed toward their country of origin.⁷¹ In many cases, local militias do not engage with ISIS escapees and Bunyan Marsous forces have remained in Sirte rather than chase them.⁷² Even in the Gulf of Sirte area, in proximity to Bunyan Marsous or LNA forces,

⁶⁶ “People from Sirte see Misrata the same as the Islamic State: no system, no government, no army. Misrata is not building a state. Their fighters wear flip-flops”. Crisis Group interview, member of Sirte local council and Sirte crisis committee, Misrata, October 2016.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Bunyan Marsous commanders and officials, October 2016–March 2017.

⁶⁸ “Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Support Mission in Libya”, United Nations, 4 April 2017.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Libyan interior ministry official in charge of collecting ISIS fighters' bodies from Sirte, Bunyan Marsous commanders, Misrata, October 2016. At the time, only 450 bodies were expected to be processed. According to a senior Libyan intelligence official, some 70 per cent of ISIS members were foreign. Main nationalities included Tunisians, Egyptians, Nigeriens, Chadians, Malians, Eritreans and Senegalese, with smaller numbers of Saudis, Yemenis, Qataris, Iraqis, Syrians, French, British and Canadians. Many sub-Saharan African members likely were mercenaries; in this respect ISIS is no different than many Libyan militias in making generous use of hired guns. Crisis Group interview, Ismail Shukri, head of military intelligence, Misrata, October 2016.

⁷⁰ “They are no longer passing in convoys, but in small groups or as individuals. They've learned the lessons of the past – if they come in large convoys they will be bombed”. Crisis Group interview, Jamal Triki, commander of Misrata's Third Force, Sebha, March 2017.

⁷¹ “The Tunisians have headed west and are largely around Sabratha, although not concentrated – they've learned the lessons from the U.S. strike. This is very worrying for the Tunisians and Algerians. The Sudanese went back toward Sudan. Others are in the greater Sirte area in small groups”. Crisis Group interview, senior European intelligence official, location withheld, May 2017.

⁷² An army officer in Sebha said: “Sometimes we see ten cars from ISIS come through, but nobody stops them. Nobody wants to pick a fight, it's not worth it”. Crisis Group interview, army officer, Sebha, March 2017.

many local ISIS members simply went back into their community where they might or might not be held accountable by local tribes. The assessment of a senior European intelligence official concurs with this view:

What we have seen so far is that ISIS in Sirte has split into its components. The Libyans have melted into the background, into their communities and are laying low. We were surprised to have only picked up signs of very small numbers headed toward Niger and Mali. We had worried they would bring their experience to locals there, but we think northern Mali is not a safe zone for jihadists, France is very active there and it's difficult for them. And they have no particular attachment to Malian causes and rivals in al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb who might not welcome them. So most ISIS people who escaped Sirte are just keeping a low profile.⁷³

B. Tunisia: Discrediting Democratic Politics

If Libya's growing anarchy after the outbreak of hostilities among rival militias in 2014 offered an opportunity to recreate the strategy of exploiting disorder ISIS had successfully implemented in Iraq and Syria, in Tunisia the group sought to undermine the fragile ongoing transition and consensus-driven politics. The regional context was defined by two developments that resonated strongly in the country: on the one hand, the rise of ISIS and its violent, revolutionary message; on the other, Islamist-secular polarisation and – in the jihadist narrative – failure of the strategy of pragmatic Islamists to participate in electoral politics, as demonstrated by the July 2013 coup against the Muslim Brotherhood president of Egypt. The decision by An-Nahda to crack down on Ansar Sharia in August 2013 and later the same year to pursue negotiations with its secular opponents, including former regime figures – leading in late 2014 to the election of Beji Caïd Essebsi, a stalwart establishment figure, as president – provided jihadists with easy targets.

Videos produced by ISIS (as well as al-Qaeda aligned jihadist groups such as Oqba Ibn Nafa Brigade, operating in the west of the country and composed in part of the more hard-line elements of Ansar Sharia) in 2014-2015 make this clear, condemning Essebsi as an agent of Western interests and An-Nahda leader Rached Ghannouchi as an infidel. They advocated violent overthrow of the democratic institutions put in place since 2011 and challenged the consensus being crafted by political elites.⁷⁴ This stood in stark contrast to what much of Ansar Sharia's leadership in Tunisia advocated until mid-2013, as it tried to avoid confronting the state and did not see Tunisia as a land of jihad; instead, it sought popular support through proselytisation and charitable action.

Building on a theme pioneered by Ansar Sharia, ISIS emphasised feelings of injustice shared by large spans of the population – particularly those from marginalised regions and poor urban peripheries that most often encounter state brutality, corrup-

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, senior European intelligence official, location withheld, May 2017.

⁷⁴ "In all of the videos by Tunisian ISIS members, they are clear about what they want to see happen in Tunisia. They attack An-Nahda and President Beji Caïd Essebsi and condemn the political consensus between them. They say they want to carry out attacks in Tunisia once they have consolidated their position in Libya, and speak of wanting to create an 'African army' that will attack Tunisia". Crisis Group interview, researcher, Tunis, February 2016.

tion and social exclusion.⁷⁵ It frequently cited cases of police abuse – especially of Islamists and their families – as well as of the ill-treatment of Ansar Sharia members in prison. This, coupled with ISIS’ call for violence in Tunisia, helped split Ansar Sharia between more quietist and more violent factions, even if both shared many similar concerns. For a time, ISIS’ stance – and its decision not to target Muslim civilians, focusing instead on security services and foreigners – lent it at least superficial popularity as many Tunisians strived for the kind of *tabula rasa* for which it stood.⁷⁶

While attacks by both ISIS and al-Qaeda-linked groups have taken place since the August 2013 crackdown on Ansar Sharia (some of whose members joined one or the other), ISIS has focused on spectacular operations targeting civilians and state symbols. The 18 March 2015 attack on the Bardo Museum complex in Tunis (22 killed), the 26 June 2015 attack by a lone gunman on a beach resort in Sousse (38 killed, all foreign tourists) and the 24 November 2015 suicide attack on a bus carrying presidential guard members in Tunis (twelve killed) destabilised the government, exposed the security forces’ weakness, harmed the economy and fed the perception that Tunisia was on the brink of collapse.⁷⁷

The November attack in particular made clear that the security services, destabilised and demoralised by the 2011 uprising and long associated with the former regime’s brutality, were not up to the task. It marked a turning point, prompting a strong response from the security services. Senior officials from the Ben Ali era were appointed to key positions and the government put in place far more draconian policing methods, including imposing a state of emergency. The degree of coordination among the various attacks – and whether they served a coherent strategy – remains unclear, even if hostility to the consensus between An-Nahda and its secular rival Nida Tounes was a recurrent message of ISIS in its propaganda.

The most spectacular operation was still to come, however. On 7 March 2016, ISIS fighters attempted to seize control of Ben Guerdane, a town on the border with Libya. The attack appeared to have been planned in Libya as a response to the U.S. air strike on an ISIS camp in Sabratha, at a distance of 170km in western Libya. ISIS’ goal seemed to be to replicate the strategy of territorialisation practiced in Mosul, Raqqa and Sirte and keep control of the town. It also sought to exploit local tensions between the town’s establishment, an extended tribe called Touazine that dominates the contraband networks exercising control over the local economy, and its poorer residents.⁷⁸ Over 60, mostly Tunisian jihadists – a mix of returnees from Libya and

⁷⁵ Also see Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°50, *Jihadist Violence in Tunisia: The Urgent Need for a National Strategy*, 22 June 2016.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, residents of low-income neighbourhoods, Tunis, 2015-2016.

⁷⁷ While ISIS claimed all three attacks, the one targeting Bardo Museum initially was claimed by the Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade, a jihadist group operating in the Mount Chambi area of western Tunisia that has expressed support for both ISIS and al-Qaeda. See Michael Ayari, “Tunisia’s Grand Compromise Faces its Biggest Test”, Crisis Group commentary, 19 March 2015.

⁷⁸ “What happened in Ben Guerdane was akin to a civil war. The residents of Ben Guerdane who joined ISIS are not Touazines. These non-Touazines rose through the ranks of the smuggling networks in the 2000s, and especially after 2011. Most come from the foothills at the limit of Beni Gedeche province. It was the Touazines who showed the army where the terrorists were hiding”. Crisis Group interview, geographer specialising in southern Tunisia and Libya, Tunis, October 2016.

sympathetic locals – took control of major thoroughfares, attempting to get residents to join them and distributing weapons before storming the local police and national guard compounds.⁷⁹ They failed after security forces sent reinforcements; 36 jihadists, eleven members of security forces and seven civilians were killed.

The assault on Ben Guerdane was a shock, but the fact that security forces quickly took control of the situation boosted their confidence.⁸⁰ Subsequent investigations into the attacks also contributed to dismantling other ISIS cells in Tunisia, contributing to making Ben Guerdane a turning point: although ISIS has claimed many small-scale attacks, mostly targeting security forces, there has been no major attack since then.⁸¹ Still, that ISIS sought to exploit divides between the town's establishment, an extended tribe called Touazine that dominates the contraband networks exercising control over the local economy, and its poorer residents, is telling of the group's ability to exploit localised tensions.⁸²

The strong security measures taken by the government in the aftermath of the 2015 attacks also raised longer-term questions that Tunisia will need to address as part of its democratic transition. In particular, they rekindled both polarisation between Islamists and anti-Islamists, especially regarding control of the religious space and debate about the kind of security sector reform that still must be implemented.⁸³

C. *Algeria: AQIM's Dissidents*

Jihadists who pledged allegiance to ISIS and operate within Algeria were drawn chiefly from pre-existing groups previously affiliated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). They are remnants of the 1990s “black decade” who for the most part survived in the mountainous parts of Kabylia and eastern Algeria.⁸⁴ To date, only two such groups have declared their loyalty to ISIS and, overall, only a relatively small number of Algerians are ISIS members; while some have encouraged attacks in their home country from Syria,⁸⁵ very few individuals in Algeria itself – most probably less than 100 –⁸⁶ have heeded the call to pledge allegiance to ISIS. All in

⁷⁹ “They immediately started setting up checkpoints and would interrogate us – asking us for our profession, whether we knew how to use weapons, whether we would join them, asking taxi drivers if they leased their cars and if so promising them that under their rule there would be no usury or corruption”. Crisis Group interview, Ben Guerdane resident, Tunis, May 2016.

⁸⁰ “The U.S. airstrike on Sabratha accelerated plans for the Ben Guerdane attack, but planning was already under way. It was well-prepared. They had support throughout the city. We think 300-500 sympathisers in Ben Guerdane supported them”. Crisis Group interview, European intelligence official, location withheld, March 2016.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, lawyer, Tunis, August 2016.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, geographer specialising in southern Tunisia and Libya, Tunis, October 2016.

⁸³ See Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°50, *Jihadist Violence in Tunisia: The Urgent Need for a National Strategy*, 22 June 2016.

⁸⁴ “ISIS in Algeria is 100 per cent composed of groups that previously existed in the country”. Crisis Group interview, regional counter-terrorism official, Algiers, September 2016.

⁸⁵ Abu Hafs al-Djazairi and Abu al-Bara al-Djazairi, two Algerian ISIS recruits, vowed to wage a “long war” in Algeria on their way to Andalusia. See “

سندكك كل من يتناول على الجزائر و أبناء الجزائر 2”, Facebook, 14 July 2015; Mohamed Berkani, “Daech déclare la guerre à l’Algérie et promet de reconquérir l’Andalousie”, Géopolis, 15 July 2015.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Algerian officials, foreign diplomats, Algiers, September-October 2016.

all, security officials worry more about ISIS' presence in their neighbours than at home.⁸⁷

To an extent, this reflects steps Algeria took after a January 2013 wake-up call, when al-Murabitoun, an Algerian-led jihadist group led by former members of AQIM, attacked the In Amenas natural gas complex in Tiguentourine, near the Libyan border. In the wake of the attack, the country's security approach was overhauled. This eventually led to a restructuring of the intelligence agency chiefly responsible for counter-terrorism.⁸⁸

Since Tiguentourine, measures have been taken, especially with surveillance of borders. We can't rule out a large-scale attack but there is an increasingly thorough surveillance mesh and cooperation with the local population. We are not in a situation where local populations are helping terrorists, unlike in neighbouring countries. There's also an important concentration of troops, border guards, and aerial border surveillance with international cooperation. Algeria learned the lessons of the 1990s. We have built up our immune defences against radicalisation. All of the security services – police, gendarmes, intelligence – have improved their coordination, working together to identify places – mosques, prisons, etc. – and techniques of radicalisation. The prisons are also much better managed. The imams who go there are designated by the Minister of Religious Affairs and Endowments and the radical leaders are isolated so they can't proselytise.⁸⁹

Since then, Algeria's security services have taken no chances. When, in September 2014, Jund al-Khalifa, a group operating in the Jurjura mountains, announced its allegiance to ISIS and claimed responsibility for kidnapping and killing Hervé Gourdel, a French tourist, the response was swift. The group's leader, Abdelmalek Gouri, appeared principally motivated by a desire to emancipate himself from the AQIM hierarchy, echoing previous disputes among leaders of the al-Qaeda franchise that resulted in splinter movements in the last two decades.⁹⁰ Gourdel's murder provoked a fierce response from the security services; by January 2015, Gouri had been killed and by the end of the same year most of Jund al-Khilafa's 50 members reportedly had been either killed or arrested.

Another group, Katiba al-Ghuraba, announced its formation in July 2015 in the eastern towns of Constantine and Skikda. Composed in part of a previously AQIM-

⁸⁷ "The Algerian security services seem less worried about Algeria than about Libya and Tunisia. They say the armed groups in Algeria are under control – it's the impact of Libya and Tunisia that worried them, because those are not under control". Crisis Group interview, Djallil Lounnas, researcher at Montreal Centre for International Studies, Algiers, September 2016.

⁸⁸ See Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°164, *Algeria and its neighbours*, 12 October 2015.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior Algerian counter-terrorism official, Algiers, March 2017.

⁹⁰ "Those in ISIS who are older are those who have been discredited within AQIM, or aspired to a position in AQIM but did not get the job". Crisis Group interview, regional counter-terrorism official, Algiers, September 2016. The move from AQIM to ISIS may also suggest that the AQIM-affiliated groups were running out of steam. "AQIM has major problems of recruitment in Algeria – they're not attracting people, not like they used to. They're able to maintain roughly 200-300 men fighting but still they have problems – you kill 50-60 they can replace maybe 30-40". Crisis Group interview, Djallil Lounnas, researcher, Algiers, September 2016.

aligned group, Katiba al-Ittissam, it has carried out relatively small-scale attacks in the region which in turn prompted extensive military responses. Neither ISIS affiliate poses a serious threat to the Algerian state, even if those from the east have the possibility of gaining influence over contraband trade with Tunisia or seek refuge there.⁹¹ They nonetheless were met by a zero-tolerance response from the authorities, which stood in contrast to their prior stance of leaving open the possibility of amnesty for groups that lay down their arms.⁹²

Generally speaking, Algeria has put into practice a three-part strategy: massive force deployment against militant groups; pervasive security presence (the ranks of the police, in particular, have expanded considerably over the last decade); and, notably through the Civil Concord, a policy of national reconciliation that provided an amnesty to Islamist insurgents and, in exchange for leaving politics, allowed them to engage in conservative social activism.⁹³ ISIS' emergence led to the addition of a fourth dimension, a focus on cybersecurity and online jihadist recruitment.

Overall, the feeling among officials and many analysts is that this strategy – however imperfect and often-criticised for its eschewing of accountability for the killings and kidnappings committed by militants and security forces in the 1990s – has worked.⁹⁴ The small number of Algerian foreign fighters and low level of in-country ISIS activity comforts this view. That said, the high costs of maintaining such an imposing security posture – in particular the deployment of thousands of troops at the borders with Libya, Niger and Mali – could prove prohibitive, especially given falling oil prices. Another concern revolves around a potential battle to succeed President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who has been seriously ill for many years. This in turn could provoke infighting within the security establishment, although many analysts believe that any turmoil will be temporary and the army will remain firmly in charge.⁹⁵

D. Morocco: Safe, for Now

Morocco is the only Maghreb country that, to date, has not experienced an ISIS attack – this, despite several reported attempts and ISIS's successful recruitment efforts; likewise, it stands alone in not having any part of its territory serve as a *maquis* (isolated safe zone, often in mountainous areas) for jihadist groups.

⁹¹ See Salima Tlemçani, "Drogues, carburants et trafic d'armes à Bir El Ater", *El Watan*, 11 May 2017.

⁹² "150 terrorists have been killed in the past six months. The orders were to kill, no prisoners. So if you want to surrender you still can, but the focus now is on force. Also there's no real risk to the government in going after these fringe groups in the middle of nowhere with no popular support". Crisis Group interview, counter-terrorism researcher, Algiers, September 2016.

⁹³ This is not without controversy. "Algeria made the choice to have a social Islam rather than a political Islam, and we've allowed all sorts of aggressions against individual liberties. Freedom of religion, freedom of clothing – soon those of us who don't wear the veil will be a minority. Those who came down from the *maquis* imposed their laws. These are codes that were imposed on society and mean that we are anchored in an Islam that doesn't necessarily show itself – it's rooted in the spirit of the young. They will grow up with a more and more hateful discourse". Crisis Group interview, political analyst, Algiers, September 2016. Such sentiment is common among educated elites across the francophone Maghreb.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, officials, security analysts, September 2016-March 2017.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Explanations vary. Morocco deployed a vast security web across the country. Morocco's borders also are very well-guarded, especially in Western Sahara,⁹⁶ and Rabat tightened its 2003 anti-terrorism law, adding provisions to sanction foreign fighters, including five-fifteen year prison terms and heavy fines. Plus, like Algeria, Morocco believes it has learned lessons from past confrontation with jihadist groups. Since the 2003 Casablanca bombings, it has improved its policing and intelligence and, more recently, begun to address its prison radicalisation problem.⁹⁷ Since 2014 – in response both to ISIS' emergence and to Libya's worsening situation – it has deployed joint army, gendarmerie and police patrols, called *hadar* (vigilance) at many sensitive locations.

This security-oriented, preventative approach, focused on professionalisation of the security services, culminated in March 2015 with the creation of a new government agency, the Central Bureau of Judicial Investigations (Bureau central d'investigation judiciaire, BCIJ), which prioritises counter-terrorism and transnational crimes. The BCIJ, which unlike other security agencies frequently communicates about its activities in local media (which dubs it the "the Moroccan FBI"), claims to have dismantled over 40 terrorist cells over 2015 and 2016; among those, most were small (three-nine members) and engaged chiefly in recruitment,⁹⁸ although the government believes some were preparing attacks and had smuggled weapons from Libya.⁹⁹ The bureau also contributed to the capture of several terrorism suspects in Europe, including the perpetrators of the November 2015 Paris bombings.¹⁰⁰

Amid this sense of confidence, there is at least one reason for concern: several of the dismantled ISIS cells reportedly were in the southern region of Agadir, an area not previously known for its militancy. This suggests that ISIS is spreading to areas where other jihadist groups have not.

⁹⁶ "These may be the best-guarded borders in Africa, despite proximity to a very troubled Sahel region". Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, Paris, March 2015.

⁹⁷ See Mohamed Salah Tamek, "Morocco's Approach to Countering Violent Extremism", Washington Institute for Near Policy, 16 May 2014.

⁹⁸ See "Abdelhak Khiame: 'Grâce au travail de nos équipes, plusieurs projets d'attentats ont pu être déjoués à travers le monde entier'", *Telquel*, 24 December 2016. Some Moroccan officials and their international partners criticise this strategy of frequent communication about counter-terrorism efforts as both tending to exaggerate the danger posed and creating false confidence about the capacity to prevent attacks that – as seen in Europe – are very hard to predict or thwart. Crisis Group interviews, Moroccan and European security officials, Rabat, October 2016–June 2017.

⁹⁹ See "Terrorisme: Les armes saisies par le BCIJ ont transité via l'Algérie", *L'Economiste*, 29 January 2017.

¹⁰⁰ See "Terrorisme: El Khayam, directeur du BCIJ, dit tout sur la coopération avec la France", *le360.ma*, 20 January 2016. Among other claims, the BCIJ said its intelligence led to the location of the hideout used by Paris attack ringleader Abdelhamid Abaaoud and prevented other attacks in France in Belgium.

IV. Lessons from the Past; Prospects for the Future

Unpacking the causes of ISIS' relative strength in various localities is an inexact science at best. It is a perilous one, too: because correlation can be mistaken for causation and ISIS' local opportunism mistaken for a global strategy; and because ISIS decision-making, which may play an important part in determining its focus on a certain locale, is opaque. More broadly, as Crisis Group wrote in its report, *Exploiting Disorder*:

The roots of [ISIS'] expansion defy generic description. Patterns of radicalisation vary from country to country, village to village, individual to individual. Autocrats, political exclusion, flawed Western interventions, failing governance, closing avenues for peaceful political expression, the distrust of the state in neglected peripheries, traditional elites' declining authority and the lack of opportunity for growing youth populations have all played their part Proselytising of intolerant strands of Islam has, in places, helped prepare the ground. The sectarian currents coursing through much of the Muslim world both are aggravated by IS[IS] and give it succour.¹⁰¹

Nonetheless, there are patterns and practices from which governments can learn, and in this regard ISIS' performance in the Maghreb offers a microcosm of trends observed elsewhere – the close relationship between conflict and instability on the one hand, and ISIS' success on the other; the organisation's appeal to a youthful, anti-establishment constituency (albeit only a small minority of that constituency) that feels marginalised, neglected and suppressed by regimes; its ability to take advantage of both pre-existing non-state networks (whether jihadist, criminal or otherwise) and of failures of more pragmatic, politically-oriented Islamist strands; and its resilience and adaptability to differing and shifting circumstances.

Equally apparent from the Maghrebi experience are the strengths but also limitations of state responses focused on security and on regimenting the religious sphere, especially because their reaction to recurrent political contestation – about the perception of pervasive corruption, socio-economic grievances or sentiments of ethnic or cultural marginalisation – often tend to the repressive and because of the lack of effective mediation between average citizens and political elites. Finally, while the Maghreb (with the exception of Libya) for the most part has been spared some of the intense regional jockeying for power and geopolitical rivalries, it has witnessed what can be accomplished with regional cooperation – and what is missing without it.

A. Conflict and Chaos as Catalysts for ISIS

ISIS' territorial inroads in the Maghreb were, unsurprisingly, most pronounced in Libya – the one state that experienced state collapse. As Crisis Group wrote:

Especially in the Middle East, jihadists' expansion is more a product of instability than its primary driver; is due more to radicalisation during crises than beforehand; and owes more to fighting between their enemies than to their own strengths.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group, *Exploiting Disorder*, op. cit., p. ii.

Rarely can such a movement gather force or seize territory outside a war zone or collapsed state.¹⁰²

That has been the principal causal factor for ISIS' rise in the Maghreb, and to this day presents the most potent threat to this region. Simply put, there can be no sophisticated, coherent or unified Libyan response to ISIS as long as the country remains as fragmented as it is today, and the country is likely to remain fragmented as long as external actors – both direct neighbours and countries farther afield – pull in different directions.¹⁰³ Paradoxically, in this sense, if the international community wants to fight terrorism it must expand its focus beyond counter-terrorism. With the appointment of a new UN Special Envoy, Ghassan Salamé, the time for a robust rethink is now.¹⁰⁴

First, as Crisis Group has argued elsewhere, the international community must pay greater attention to some of the drivers of Libya's fragmentation. This will entail renewing efforts toward a more inclusive peace process, ameliorating the state of its economy (notably by ensuring that the strongest remaining economic institutions – the National Oil Corporation and the Central Bank of Libya – are protected from the rival governments' attempts to control them); and encouraging dialogue among key military actors and rival non-jihadist militias, ensuring they are involved in negotiating military arrangements in a revised Libyan Political Agreement.

Second, it should make sure that victory against ISIS in Sirte is sustained, and does not fall victim to Libya's dysfunctions. That will require adequate funding for stabilisation and reconstruction plans as well as consultation with local residents. Too, if the goal is to ensure that ISIS fighters who left Sirte not regroup elsewhere or join the ranks of other militias, limited types of military intervention, such as airstrikes, while probably necessary, will not suffice. Instead, in this fragmented, militia-dominated landscape, the goal ought to be to try to integrate groups at risk of falling prey to the strategy of infiltration successfully used by ISIS operatives in 2014-2015 into political processes and conflict resolution initiatives, rather than conflate them with jihadists.¹⁰⁵

The broad expanse covering eastern Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Libya as well as northern Chad and eastern Sudan is experiencing weak or even non-existent state governance. That does not mean it is ungoverned; in many instances, non-state actors fill the vacuum.¹⁰⁶ ISIS and other jihadist groups are extremely mobile, demonstrating a capacity to "flex across the battlespace" and deploying a form of warfare based chiefly on all-terrain vehicles and light weaponry.¹⁰⁷ Monitoring and preventing the movement of ISIS fighters from and to Libya therefore should be a priority. If neighbouring states that have the means to do this are already doing so – particularly Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia – and others, like Niger and Mali, benefit

¹⁰² Crisis Group, *Exploiting Disorder*, op. cit., p. ii.

¹⁰³ See Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°170, *The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset*, 4 November 2016.

¹⁰⁴ See Crisis Group media release, "Crisis Group Welcomes Ghassan Salamé's UN Role in Libya", 23 June 2017.

¹⁰⁵ This is particularly relevant for militias that stand to lose from the current situation and have some ideological affinity with radical Islamism, even if they are not jihadist.

¹⁰⁶ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°227, *The Central Sahel: A Perfect Sandstorm*, 25 June 2015.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior U.S. military official, Washington, June 2016.

from international support where they lack the means, Chad and Sudan are particularly exposed, especially since regions of these states (the north for Chad and Darfur for Sudan) have contributed fighters and mercenaries to a range of belligerents in the Libyan conflict.¹⁰⁸

B. *Security Plus*

Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia all claim to be aiming for a holistic counter-jihadist approach. This, they define as focusing on inclusion, combating socio-economic inequalities, improving prison conditions, carrying out de-radicalisation campaigns, and so on.¹⁰⁹ But reality differs. In practice, their focus chiefly is on two aspects: investing in security and controlling the religious sphere.

Crisis Group has raised questions about the “Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)” agenda and the risk posed by of presenting a grab-bag of root causes to explain an almost impossibly vague and broad phenomenon. One should be careful about drawing a straight line between factors such as poverty or underdevelopment and jihadist recruitment; re-hatting as CVE activities like education or job creation in marginalised areas risks casting the net too wide or stigmatising communities as potential extremists.¹¹⁰

That said, there is little question that particularly vulnerable, marginalised youth groups constitute a recruitment pool for ISIS, in the Maghreb as elsewhere, and their anti-establishment sentiment lends credence to jihadist criticism of corrupt local regimes. The geographic patterns of ISIS’s expansion, notably in Tunisia and Morocco, confirm this and serve as a warning regarding present and future vulnerabilities of Maghrebi states as well as the need to tackle some of the more obvious causes of discontent. Corruption ranks among the highest, insofar as it solidifies the perception that socio-economic conditions result from structural injustice.¹¹¹

C. *State Control of Religious Discourse?*

Most regional states have advocated, and in some cases implemented, policies that seek to pit a so-called authentic, “moderate” Islam with the vision presented by ISIS and other jihadists. Described as “reform of the religious sphere” in Morocco or “occupation of religious space” in Algeria, these constitute pillars of counter-radicalisation policies, the soft counter-point to hard security policies.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ See Jérôme Tubiana and Claudio Gramizzi, “Tubu Trouble: State and Statelessness in the Chad–Sudan–Libya Triangle”, Small Arms Survey, June 2017.

¹⁰⁹ In the case of Tunisia, see Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°50, *Jihadist Violence in Tunisia: The Urgent Need for a National Strategy*, 22 June 2016.

¹¹⁰ See Crisis Group, *Exploiting Disorder*, op. cit., Section IV.D, p.46-49.

¹¹¹ On the link between corruption and regional socio-economic exclusion in Tunisia, see Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°177, *Blocked Transition: Corruption and Regionalism in Tunisia*, 10 May 2017.

¹¹² Crisis Group interviews, politicians and security officials, Algiers, Rabat and Tunis, September 2016–March 2017. An Algerian imam said: “We have to take care of the mosques because that’s where it all starts; and we’re calling on the Algerian authorities to coordinate among the school, the mosque, and the family, because each school has an association of students’ families. It’s in this triptych we must work: family, school, mosque. It is necessary to occupy the discursive space”. Crisis Group interview, Algerian imam involved in counter-radicalisation strategy, Algiers, April 2016.

Promotion of mainstream religious discourse offers the state several important benefits. It focuses attention on official religious spaces (mosques and madrasas); enables greater oversight over them; and minimises the risk of their being used as recruitment centres. It also allows regimes to promote a non-threatening discourse and to cultivate as well as co-opt religious scholars who accept its legitimacy. In this vein, Morocco promotes a reformist religious approach that seeks to “balance modernity and tradition”,¹¹³ implement progressive reforms where possible, all the while ensuring hegemony of a pro-monarchy discourse in which the king’s role of “commander of the faithful” is widely accepted by ordinary citizens and various strands of Islamists, including former jihadists. Algeria likewise sought to nurture pro-regime sentiment among Sufi brotherhoods and pointed to Sufism, a mystical Islamic tradition, as an antidote to extremism.

But this approach presents drawbacks. Notably, they do nothing to address the yearning for a more militant, anti-establishment message; indeed, rather than legitimising the state, co-optation of religious discourse risks discrediting mainstream religious leadership. This is the case, for example, when Sufis are used by political figures to vouch for reputation or when they become an extension of regime clientelist networks.¹¹⁴ As an Algerian imam put it, for this effort to succeed, “there needs to be social justice, the people need to have faith in their government. Religious discourse cannot solve the problem by itself”.¹¹⁵

This point often is ignored by governments at their peril. The appeal of groups such as ISIS is precisely that they are protest movements, offering the type of anti-government and anti-establishment discourse that appeals, particularly to the young. A propped-up, official “moderate Islam” inevitably will be weighed down by the perceived illegitimacy of the governments doing the propping up. Morocco offers a recent case in point: the ministry of religious endowments’ decision to have a local imam condemn a protest movement in al-Hoceima, in northern Morocco, turned a Friday sermon into a confrontation between the imam and a protest leader. It also prompted further unrest amid unconvincing accusations by the pro-government press that the protest movement was emulating ISIS.¹¹⁶

Precisely given the demand for a radical, anti-establishment discourse, attempts to imposing a state-sanctioned religious one can backfire. A better response to the appeal of violent, jihadist groups is to allow and protect a more pluralistic, inclusive religious space. This is especially so given that jihadists have proven adept at deploying a language of religious contestation and that ISIS in particular has prioritised a

¹¹³ This expression is commonly used in official statements and King Mohammed VI’s speeches. See for instance “Discours royal relatif à la restructuration du champ religieux au Maroc”, 30 April 2004, available on the website of the ministry of religious endowments and religious affairs, www.habous.gov.ma.

¹¹⁴ As a prominent Algerian religious figure put it, commenting on the well-publicised tour of Sufi shrines by of a former senior official who had been charged with corruption, “it furnishes material to the Wahhabis and the terrorists to say, look, everything is fake”. Crisis Group interview, Algerian imam involved in counter-radicalisation strategy, Algiers, April 2016.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. A Moroccan writer advocated a focus on education rather than religious discourse.

¹¹⁶ See “Nasser Zefzafi attaque sur le terrain des valeurs religieuses”, *Telquel*, 26 May 2017; Tarik Qattab, “Quand Zefzafi se comporte comme Al Baghdadi en plein prêche du vendredi”, *le360.ma*, 26 May 2017.

recruitment strategy premised on a doctrine of personal empowerment or advancement more than on theological grounds.¹¹⁷

D. *Regional Collaboration*

Regional coordination is essential to the fight against ISIS in two principal respects: it enables vital security and intelligence cooperation, and it reduces the risk of various countries fuelling proxy wars that, in turn, create an enabling environment for jihadist movements.

As to the first point, and given the transnational nature of the threat, security cooperation is critical both among Maghrebi security agencies and between them and the rest of the world. Although Libya has been an outlier in this respect, other Maghrebi countries have had relative successes in terms of international support. Tunisia has received substantial Western aid to bolster its security services and its military; Moroccan intelligence played an important role in preventing and apprehending perpetrators of attacks in Europe, including the November 2015 Paris bombings; and Algeria works closely with both Western and African intelligence agencies to monitor security in the Sahel.¹¹⁸ That said, intra-regional cooperation has proved more problematic.

Collaboration has been most successful between Algeria and Tunisia, especially in the mountainous border areas. Both nations face a common threat as the mostly AQIM-linked groups operating in western Tunisia often have Algerian leadership and strong links with groups originating in eastern Algeria. Tunisia needs Algeria's help, while Algeria cannot afford to see another weakened state on its borders. As a result, Algeria has provided training, resources and intelligence to the Tunisian army and both countries conducted joint cross-border operations.¹¹⁹

Relations between Algeria and Morocco are more strained due to longstanding tensions related to the Western Sahara and unresolved border issues. The two countries share information but security cooperation remains patchy. The security relationship often is framed in a hostile manner: Algeria arrests and expels Moroccans it claims illegally crossed the border to rejoin ISIS in Libya; Morocco decries lack of cooperation from its eastern neighbour.¹²⁰ The result, as an Algerian counter-terrorism official put it, is a minimalist form of collaboration.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ "ISIS recruits through the internet by using Tunisians who are there [in ISIS-controlled places]. They do propaganda for the group, tell their neighbours, their families, 'it's fantastic over here, I have a job, a wife, I can pray in peace, they let women veil, etc'. But the reality is that when they recruit someone, they get paid, so they lie and make it sound better than it is". Crisis Group interview, Tunisian lawyer specialising in jihadist cases, Tunis, 5 December 2016.

¹¹⁸ See Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°164, *Algeria and its Neighbours*, 12 October 2015.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior Algerian counter-terrorism official, Algiers, March 2017.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Algerian officials, Algiers, 2014-2015; Moroccan officials, Rabat, September-November 2016. See also "Abdelhak Khiame, patron du BCIJ, appelle l'Algérie à la coopération", ledesk.ma, 17 April 2017.

¹²¹ "With Morocco, there is nothing formal but we have a gentleman's agreement: don't do anything that could harm the security or ability to fight terrorism of the other. It's a negative cooperation – I do nothing against you, you do nothing against me". Crisis Group interview, senior Algerian counter-terrorism official, Algiers, March 2017.

On all scores, the Libyan case is akin to a counter-model, demonstrating how costly is the absence of coherent regional or international cooperation. To begin, Libya's neighbours lack a clear security or counter-terrorism counterpart. The Tripoli-based, UN-recognised government has an intelligence agency and nominal control over state security services but in practice these are in the hands of a myriad of armed factions. For example, Misratans dominate the counter-terrorism field, and they took the lead in uprooting ISIS from Sirte, but their reach rarely extends beyond their areas of operation. As a result, neighbours tend to deal with armed groups that are geographically closest to them: Algeria and Tunisia with an assortment of western Libyan militias, Egypt with Haftar-aligned eastern tribes and militias, etc. Compounding the challenge is the groups' implicit threat to halt cooperation should the neighbouring country act against the lucrative smuggling in which they engage – whether related to refined fuel, heavily subsidised in Libya, or consumer goods.¹²²

The issue goes beyond the prevailing chaos and absence of state control over large parts of Libyan territory. The ongoing conflict and the country's fragmentation has politicised security policy, leading to competing and at times conflicting information and advice. Each of Libya's governments and quasi-independent, geographically-centred military coalitions has its own security agency, and each has its own list of purported terrorists. A Tunisian security researcher notes:

There are long lists of Tunisian jihadists that Tunisia has been given by both sides in Libya – both the Tripoli government and the pro-Haftar government. They are giving us different information: each side has provided us the names of genuinely dangerous people mixed in with the names of their enemies. The Tunisian authorities have started to realise that these lists are erroneous and end up no longer paying any attention to them.¹²³

Not only are its neighbours and the broader international community unable to work efficiently with Libya, but they also are unable to work in concert with one another. Regional rivalries in particular mean that different countries back competing factions, potentially further encumbering the fight against ISIS or other jihadists. This principally has revolved around competition between, on the one hand, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, which back Haftar and his Libyan National Army, and, on the other, Qatar and Turkey – competition that might well escalate in light of the crisis that has driven Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha even further apart.¹²⁴ At a minimum, international actors should push for greater respect for the arms embargo put in place by the UN Security Council, and which so far has been honoured in the breach.¹²⁵

¹²² This is particularly the case for Tunisia, a major destination of smuggled Libyan gasoline. Crisis Group interview, senior Tunisian ministry of interior official, Tunis, September 2016.

¹²³ Crisis Group interview, Tunisian security researcher, Tunis, August 2016. This was confirmed by a senior Tunisian security official. Crisis Group interview, senior Tunisian ministry of interior official, Tunis, September 2016.

¹²⁴ See Joost Hiltermann, "Qatar punched above its weight. Now it's paying the price", *New York Times*, 18 June 2017; Robert Malley and Jon Finer, "Fixing Trump's blunders on Qatar", *Washington Post*, 9 June 2017.

¹²⁵ The UN Panel of Experts on Libya's June 2017 report notes that "materiel entering Libya has been of an increasingly sophisticated nature" and particularly drew attention to the acquisition of attack helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft by the Libyan National Army, believed to have been

E. *Thinking of the Post-ISIS Moment in the Maghreb*

The most significant threat presented by ISIS' Maghrebi foreign fighters is not that, defeated in places where the group once held territory, they might return to their home countries. It is that they will move to other ripe theatres – most likely, conflict zones and areas where state governance is weak. Where stringent security procedures are in place (such as Algeria and Morocco, but also increasingly Tunisia) ISIS returnees have come back only in small numbers and almost always directly to prison.¹²⁶ In contrast, harder-line jihadists are more likely to seek new areas in which to expand. For the estimated few hundred foreign fighters driven out of Sirte, for instance, finding a new base in Libya itself or in weak states further south may prove more enticing than heading back to police states where, in many cases, they already figure on wanted lists.

While ISIS is very much on its heels, notably in Libya, its surviving fighters – many of them opportunists recruited from other groups; in some cases mercenaries – are battle-trained and positioned to continue fighting in a context that offers ample opportunity and scant reintegration prospects. Moreover, even as ISIS fades, al-Qaeda and other loosely-connected groups appear once more on the rise in the region and could be poised to recuperate ISIS veterans.¹²⁷ A European intelligence official said:

ISIS in Libya was a failure, it never really put roots down and became a Libyan movement. ISIS was something imported from abroad, something artificial. So we are seeing an evolution in ISIS – they have methods of action that may influence others, like spectacular attacks, but the territorialisation model of ISIS will no longer work. And in the meantime al-Qaeda has become more like ISIS, and at the very moment that ISIS is moving away from territorialisation we might see al-Qaeda moving toward it. There are already signs of it in Syria.¹²⁸

In other words, the jihadist landscape in the Maghreb will evolve, though its direction and ultimate form – and whether jihadists can again seize territory or recruit large numbers – remain uncertain. An observer of jihadist groups in North Africa said, “tactical disagreements and different loyalties keep these two groups apart, but there is fluidity between them and individuals move back and forth”.¹²⁹ Whether this amounts to a fifth wave of transnational jihadism or the remnants of a largely exhausted fourth wave most likely will depend on the context in which this evolution takes place – most of all, the existence of conflict and polarisation in the region.

provided by the United Arab Emirates. See “Letter dated 1 June 2017 from the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council”, United Nations Security Council, 1 June 2017, pp. 22-36.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Maghrebi and European intelligence officials, September 2016-March 2017.

¹²⁷ See Dominique Thomas, “État islamique vs. al-Qai” da: autopsie d’une lutte fratricide”, *Politique Étrangère* 1:2016.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior European intelligence official, location withheld, May 2017.

¹²⁹ See Geoff Porter, “Terrorism in North Africa: An Examination of the Threat”, Testimony before the House Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism & Intelligence, 29 March 2017.

V. Conclusion

Maghrebi states have had considerable success combating ISIS and reversing its advances through military and security means. The flow of fighters to the group has slowed down dramatically in recent years and its ability to carry out operations has been curtailed. ISIS' military reversals in the Levant and in Libya have also dampened the aura of invincibility that was an essential part of its appeal in 2014-2015. Yet, this has been essentially a security-driven approach. This is understandable: ISIS' success in Libya illustrates its ability to exploit a security vacuum and so that vacuum must be filled, one way or another. But in Libya as elsewhere, ISIS' appeal likely has other causes, among them polarised politics and a constituency of economically and socially marginalised youth that view their fate as directly linked to the state's corruption and injustice.

Whether in Casablanca, Tunis or Tripoli, a small but nonetheless significant number was attracted to ISIS in part because some perceived it as an empowering, anti-establishment revolutionary group. Addressing this demand for a more radical response to the status quo, and pushing it toward non-violent channels will require more than security crackdowns, regional and extra-regional intelligence cooperation or regulation of religious discourse (which could well prove counterproductive). Among the region's youth, many find themselves economically, politically and socially marginalised in a range of ways, and stuck between the ossified status quos and uncertain violent options. Depending on circumstances, some might be drawn to jihadist groups. The challenge is to channel this energy away from violent options. This in turn will require more than just after-the-fact security measures, but also proactive government steps to better address those grievances and to more inclusively engage those who hold them.

Rabat/Algiers/Tripoli/Tunis/Brussels, 24 July 2017

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord Mark Malloch-Brown. Its Vice Chair is Ayo Obe, a Legal Practitioner, Columnist and TV Presenter in Nigeria.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Jean-Marie Guéhenno, served as the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations from 2000-2008, and in 2012, as Deputy Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States on Syria. He left his post as Deputy Joint Special Envoy to chair the commission that prepared the white paper on French defence and national security in 2013.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in ten other locations: Bishkek, Bogota, Dakar, Kabul, Islamabad, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Sanaa, Tblisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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