



December 19, 2016

The Repercussions of Losing the Sirte Region on ISIS's Position in Libya and the Nature of the Islamic State (Preliminary Assessment)



Right: Tank with the Libyan flag in Sirte's Marine neighborhood, the last stronghold retaken from ISIS operatives (Libya Mubasher Channel, December 5, 2016). Left: Civilians in Sirte celebrating together with the soldiers who liberated the city (Al-Jazeera, December 12, 2016)

Overview

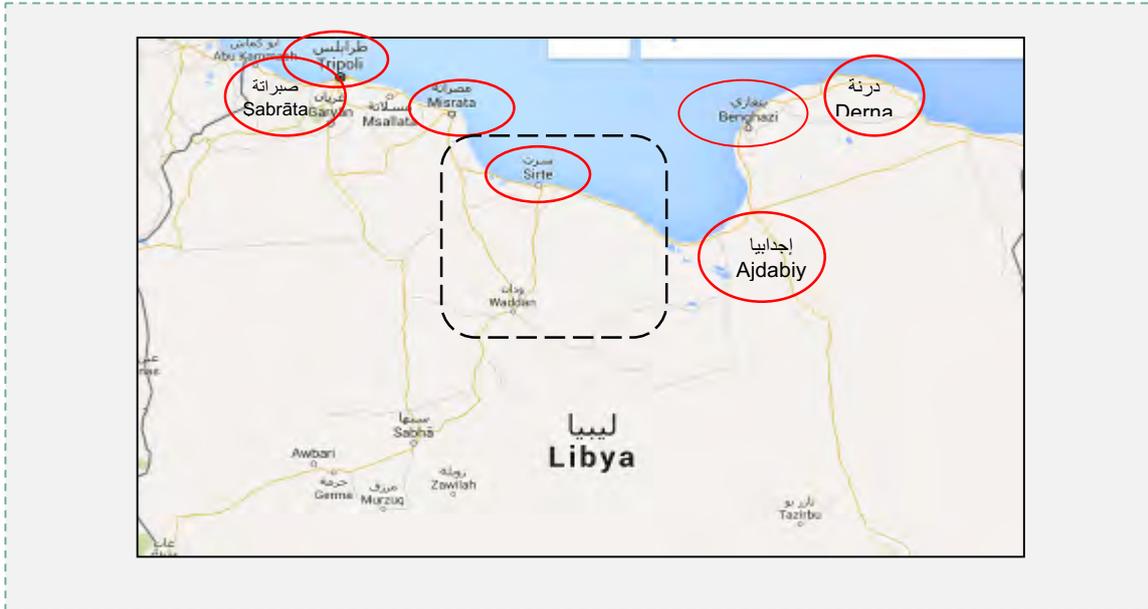
1. On December 5, 2016, after battles which lasted for seven months, the takeover of Sirte, ISIS's "capital" in Libya (and a prominent stronghold in the entire North Africa), was finally completed. **Faiz al-Saraj, the head of the Presidential Council of Libya's Government of National Accord**, officially announced on December 17 the termination of military activity in Sirte and its liberation from ISIS. The forces of the Government of National Accord, based on the Islamic militia "Libyan Dawn,"¹ took over Sirte and ISIS's territory of control in the region. Sirte was retaken by Libyan forces **with American air support** (according to Reuters' correspondent in Tunis, December 9, 2016, the Americans carried out over 500 airstrikes).
2. The spokesman for the campaign to take over Sirte announced that the forces of the Government of National Accord sustained 720 fatalities and about 3,000 wounded

¹ "Libyan Dawn" (**Fajr Libya**) is an umbrella framework of Islamic militias which was established during the uprising against Muammar Qaddafi. This militia supports the Libyan Government of National Accord. Its operatives were the main component of the forces that retook Sirte and its region.

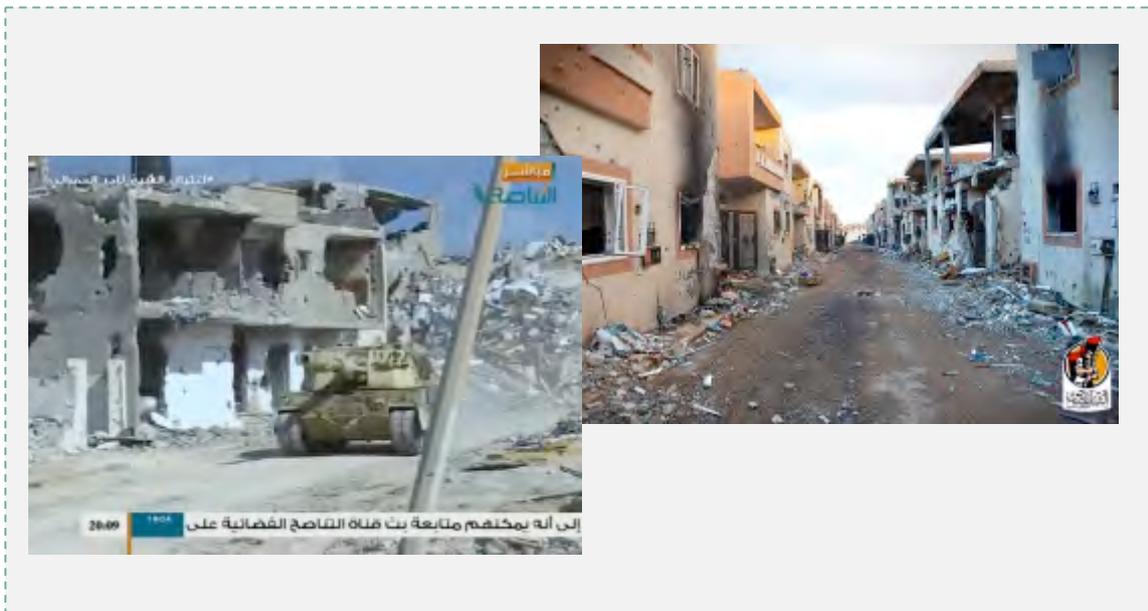
during the campaign. According to Western sources, **about 6,000 ISIS operatives had been staying in Sirte** (The Guardian, June 9, 2016). According to the Libyan Government of National Accord, **over 2,500 ISIS operatives had been killed in the operation** (Al-Hayat, December 10, 2016).

3. According to the spokesman of the Sirte campaign, the city is still being searched, and the removal of mines and IEDs still left on the ground will remain for at least one additional month. **Amid (Brigadier General) Ahmad Abu Shahma**, who was appointed as Sirte's military governor on December 13, noted that so far, hundreds of bodies of ISIS operatives had been removed from the Marine neighborhood (ISIS's Libyan stronghold), and bodies are still being removed from the neighborhood. The spokeswoman for the US Africa Command stated that the American air support for the forces of the Government of National Accord would continue even during the stage of restoring security to the city after its takeover (Al-Wasat, December 15, 2016; marinecorpstimes.com, December 15, 2016; Sputnik, December 18, 2016).

4. It can be estimated that **many hundreds of operatives, maybe even several thousands, fled the city and its environs to the desert areas in central and south Libya. These are areas outside governmental and security control**, where ISIS is present and its operatives **would be able to regroup themselves relatively freely in order to renew their activity** (Al-Hayat, December 10, 2016; Al-Jazeera, December 12, 2016). ISIS is also present in Libya's major cities, even though the geographic distance makes it difficult for them to effectively coordinate and cooperate (see following map).



ISIS's territory of control in the Sirte region which was taken over by the Libyan Government of National Accord after seven months of fighting. Major cities in which or around which ISIS is present but doesn't have control are marked with red circles (Google Maps).



Devastation in Sirte following the battles
(Ayn Libya, December 3, 2016; Al-Tanasuh Channel, December 5, 2016)



Devastation in Sirte following the battles (Al-Jazeera, December 12, 2016)

5. Libyan sources and researchers dealing with the Libyan issue express their fears that even after ISIS had lost Sirte, **it will try to reorganize its ranks and return to fight especially in the area south of Sirte.** According to various estimates, **hundreds of ISIS operatives escaped to this area even before the outbreak of the battles in Sirte, during the first stages of the campaign for the takeover of the city** (it can be estimated that additional operatives escaped to this area during the fighting and afterwards). In September 2016, **Jalal al-Din the Tunisian was appointed ISIS's new emir in Libya** (instead of the previous emir, who was killed in battle in Sirte) and is probably **due to continue the fighting outside Sirte.** According to a researcher who is an expert on Libya, this is one of the leaders who will prepare the next wave of ISIS attacks from the south of Sirte (Reuters, December 9, 2016).

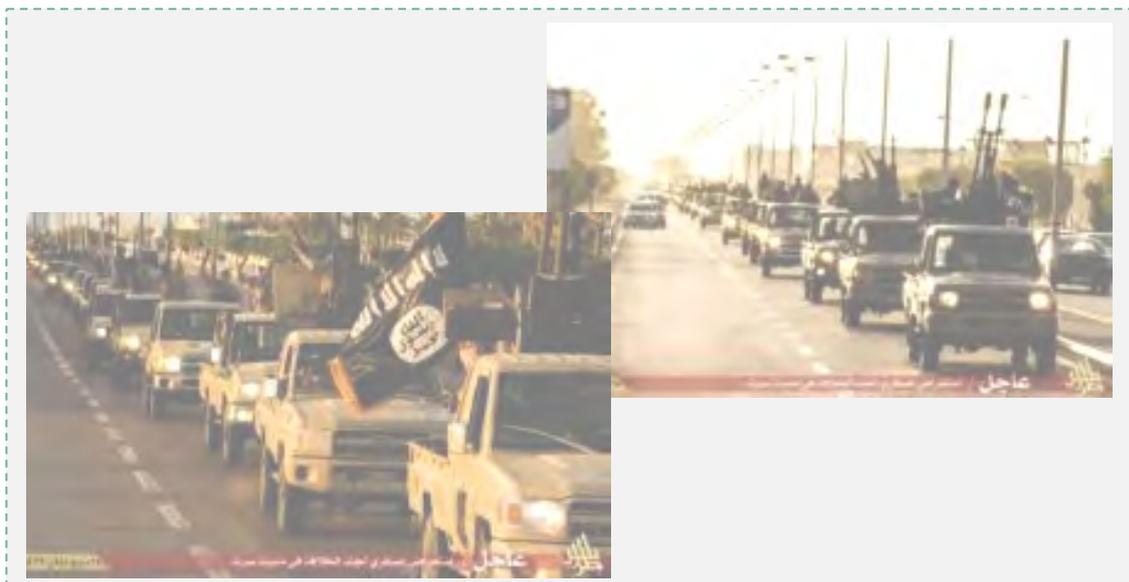
6. **Mohammed bin Salem al-Ayouni, aka Jalal al-Din the Tunisian,** was born in 1982 in east Tunisia. From Tunisia, he moved to France, where he obtained French citizenship. During the years 2011-12, he made contact with a group of jihadists operating on the Tunisian-Libyan border and persuaded them to pledge allegiance to ISIS's leader. During 2013-14, he traveled to Syria and Iraq, where he joined ISIS. He appeared in the media (2014) in a film about "removing the borders" between Iraq and Syria. On September 27, 2016, ISIS's leader appointed him the new emir of Libya, replacing **Abu Habib al-Jazrawi (Abd al-Qader al-Najdi)**, ISIS's leader in Libya, who had been killed in battle in Sirte.



An archive photo of Jalal al-Din the Tunisian (Al-Jumhuriya, Tunis, September 30, 2016)

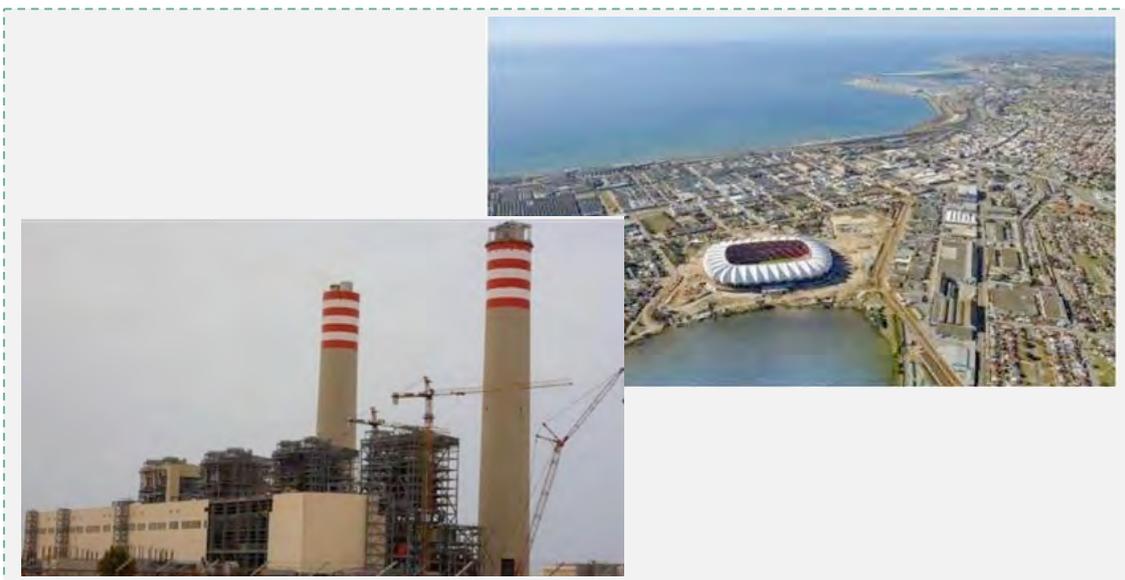
Assessment of the significance of the liberation of Sirte

7. The takeover of Sirte and its region brought about the end of a period of nearly two years, **during which ISIS managed to establish in Libya a territorial control area governing a large population, the only one of its kind outside Iraq and Syria.** The city of Sirte was taken over on February 18, 2015, when several hundreds of operatives arriving by surprise in off-road vehicles took over Sirte (Qaddafi's birthplace) almost without any battle. During the period in which ISIS controlled Sirte and its region (**about 260 km along the Libyan coast**), it established itself and built **civilian, military and government infrastructures, which served for it as a launching pad for terrorist and guerrilla warfare in other areas of Libya and other North African countries.** ISIS established itself in the Sirte region during a period of victories in Iraq and Syria (2014), **while it lost Sirte during a series of ongoing blows, including the loss of territories in Iraq and Syria.**



ISIS enters the city of Sirte on February 18, 2015. Dozens of off-road vehicles with ISIS operatives armed with Kalashnikov rifles, machine guns, RPG launchers and missiles, and anti-aircraft guns took part in ISIS's show of strength in the city (nasher.me; Twitter)

8. ISIS's control of the important city of Sirte and the region around it **significantly strengthened ISIS's power and position in Libya and in the entire North Africa.** The reason for that were all the **state-owned infrastructures in the Sirte region that fell into the hands of ISIS: an international airport, the Al-Qardabiya Air Force base, economic projects including a large-scale irrigation project (the Great Man-Made River) and a power plant west of Sirte.** The control over the economic assets and the population of Sirte assisted ISIS in establishing government and military infrastructure in the city, imposing Islamic religious law (Sharia) on the population according to ISIS's strict interpretation, and using the region under its control as a launching pad for additional terrorist attacks and guerrilla warfare in other areas in Libya and in the countries bordering it.



Right: A panorama of the city of Sirte which fell into the hands of ISIS on February 18, 2015 (Al-Maghreb al-Youm, January 31, 2015). Left: The power plant west of Sirte, which fell into the hands of ISIS (Al-Rasifa website, March 8, 2015)



One of the fighting zones in the Sirte region, with an ISIS sign: “The city of Sirte in the shadow of Sharia” (Al-Jazeera, December 12, 2016)

9. The ITIC believes that the fall of the Sirte region will significantly weaken ISIS’s position in Libya. This is because ISIS no longer has its control over the population, the financial revenues that it derived from the city and the region around it, and the ability of its military operatives to act freely in the Sirte region and use it as a base from which to carry out guerrilla and terrorist attacks. The loss of these assets will require ISIS to change the nature of its activity in Libya and place its emphasis on terrorist activities and guerrilla warfare, while no longer engaging in governance over a large population. Thus, ISIS lost its territorial basis in Libya and was weakened, yet it was not defeated, and it is to be expected that it will renew its activity in Libya, possibly after a period of reorganization.

10. **As it no longer has its territorial and governmental center in the city of Sirte, ISIS will now transfer its presence and activity** to many other centers, distant from one another, in south Libya and in cities along the coast. It will no longer have sole control over those sites (as it did in Sirte) but will maintain its presence and activity side by side with other Libyan militias (for instance, in the cities of Misrata, Ajdabiya, Benghazi, and Tripoli). From its various outposts, **ISIS will continue to initiate acts of terror and guerrilla warfare against its enemies**, and from time to time maybe even raids or terrorist attacks in remote areas, perhaps even outside Libya, **in order to prove that it is still present and active in Libya.**

11. Furthermore, **ISIS's loss of control of the Sirte region may serve as a test case of ISIS's adaptation to the new conditions imposed on it (such that may also be created in the future in Iraq and Syria, after the possible fall of Mosul and Al-Raqqah).** The ITIC's premise is that ISIS's presence and activity in Libya will continue due to the chaos and anarchy that still prevail there, the lack of effective central government, and the tribal and organizational rivalries that create government and security vacuum. However, ISIS after the loss of Sirte will return to its "normal dimensions" and remain a Salafist-jihadi guerrilla and terror organization, which will continue its activity among the many organizations and rival militias fighting in Libya.

The implications on the concept of Islamic State ("the Caliphate State")

12. ISIS's ideological concept is based on the return to the Golden Era of Islam. This is carried out through the reestablishment of the Caliphate State (the Islamic State). This State is based on the application of sharia law according to its Salafist-jihadi strict interpretation. In the first stage, ISIS strove to overthrow the regimes in Baghdad and Damascus and establish the territorial base of the "State of the Caliphate" in those cities. From there it sought to spread to vast regions in the Middle East, in North Africa (including Libya) and Southeast Asia.



Right: The State of the Caliphate in its wide borders. The names of the modern nation states do not appear on the map, but rather Islamic names alone (hanein.info). Left: An English-language map of the Islamic caliphate, with Al-Baghdadi's picture to the right (hanein.info)

13. Nowadays, about two and a half years after the proclamation of the caliphate, **this concept seems quite unrealistic**. ISIS lost about half of its territorial control areas in **Syria**, and its “capital” Al-Raqqah is targeted by its enemies. In **Iraq**, its “capital” Mosul is under an offensive by a regional and international coalition, and most of ISIS’s outposts in the Sunni province of Al-Anbar have been lost. Its loss of control in **Libya**, the only country outside Iraq and Syria where ISIS managed to establish a territorial control area, is further proof of the difficulty of ISIS (or any other Salafist-jihadi organization) to rule over vast populations according to anachronistic principles from the seventh century, coercing the inhabitants to accept Islamic religious law in its strict interpretation. Furthermore, the events in Iraq, Syria, and Libya demonstrated **ISIS’s difficulty facing a regular army well-equipped with state-of-the-art weapons** and with high motivation.

14. However, the ITIC believes that the loss of control areas belonging to the Islamic State in Iraq, Syria, and Libya **will not lead to the disappearance of ISIS in these countries**. This is due to the government and security vacuum, and the social, sectarian and religious schisms prevailing in these countries. Yet, the loss of the territories of the Islamic Caliphate will require ISIS to modify its modus operandi and adapt itself to the new situation of its transformation (once again) into a terror and guerrilla organization, as it was before it occupied Mosul. If it does so, it may follow in the footsteps of Al-Qaeda and its branches in the Middle East, which had the wisdom not to establish an Islamic state in their control areas, investing a lot of resources in day-to-day management and defense. **The establishment of the Islamic Caliphate**

**may remain a future vision abandoned by ISIS (if only temporarily),
relinquishing its paramount desire to establish it “here and now.”**