Between ISIS and a failed state: The saga of Libyan Islamists

WORKING PAPER

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SUMMARY: Libya's diverse Islamist actors played a substantial role in the 2011 armed revolution against Moammar Gadhafi and the subsequent collapse of Libya's democratization process into armed conflict. The advances of ISIS in Libya and the breakdown of Brotherhood electoral activism in neighboring Egypt, however, present an ideological and recruitment challenge to Libya's Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi factions.

About this Series:

The *Rethinking Political Islam* series is an innovative effort to understand how the developments following the Arab uprisings have shaped—and in some cases altered—the strategies, agendas, and self-conceptions of Islamist movements throughout the Muslim world. The project engages scholars of political Islam through in-depth research and dialogue to provide a systematic, cross-country comparison of the trajectory of political Islam in 12 key countries: Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Libya, Pakistan, as well as Malaysia and Indonesia.

This is accomplished through three stages:

- A **working paper** for each country, produced by an author who has conducted on-the-ground research and engaged with the relevant Islamist actors.

- A **reaction essay** in which authors reflect on and respond to the other country cases.

- A **final draft** incorporating the insights gleaned from the months of dialogue and discussion.

BROOKINGS

Islamism, Revolution, and Democratization in Libya

Islamists and their impacts on the Arab-majority uprisings, democratization and political violence of various forms has been one of the most debated issues of the "Arab Spring." Libya was no exception. Libyan Islamists have been a critical part of the armed revolution that, with NATO's assistance, was able to topple Moammar Gadhafi's regime. Several strands of the Islamists in Libya have also been an integral part of the democratization process, including electoral competition, constitutional crafting and civil society activities. Libya's Islamists were also heavily engaged in the aftermath of the collapse of the democratization process and became a part of the ongoing Libyan civil war. Islamists were not all on one side of that civil war, however; the majority sided with the Tripoli government and a small minority (mainly from the Salafi-madkhali trend and former jihadist figures) sided with the Tobruk government.

Before delving into the structure of the chapter and the analysis, a few Libyan peculiarities need to be clarified. Frist, the Libyan events of 2011 were the only political revolution in the Arab-majority uprisings. As opposed to Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen, the revolutionary forces not only managed to topple the regime and its head, but also fundamentally altered the political system. Tunisian, Egyptian, Bahraini, Syrian, and Yemeni pro-change forces did not have the capacity to do so and therefore ended in different trajectories of transition, stagnation or deterioration. Political compromises between the status-quo forces and forces of change were the highlight in Tunisia. A bloody defeat for the pro-January forces was the main result in Egypt. The pro-change forces in Bahrain faced a similar fate. And an armed, political stalemate between these forces was the main feature in Syria and Yemen.

Between August 2011 and May 2014, Libya's pro-revolution forces had actually succeeded in significantly altering the status quo. The results were not only limited to taking down the regime of Moammar Gadhafi, but also to establish unprecedented basic freedoms and free and fair elections for the first time in Libya's history. Libyan Islamists were at the core of the two processes. They significantly contributed to the fight against Gadhafi forces. Several Islamist groups, factions and figures also participated in the electoral process, including post-jihadist ones, such as figures and factions from the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and others. Islamists, with other Libyan conservative tribal forces, have also tried to use the institutional space to implement their understanding of sharia laws.

Since May 2014, when General Khalifa Hefter declared his second televised coup, the political game in Libya has significantly changed. Before that date, Islamists and their rivals were contesting politics on four fronts: a media front, an election/political institutional front, a judicial front and a controlled hard-power front. The latter front was represented by a balance of terror system rather than a full-fledged armed confrontation. Each political party/coalition was attempting to extend its influence over, and strengthen its alliance with, armed brigades of various affiliations. The May 2014 attempted coup turned that multi-dimensional conflict into primarily an armed one. The majority of Islamist forces, whether from the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood or formerly Libyan Islamic Fighting Group or others, were on the side of the Tripoli government, and a minority of Islamists, mainly from the Salafi-madkhali trend and former jihadist figures, sided with the Tobruk government and Colonel Hefter's forces. The

transformation of the conflict had major implications on Islamist behavior, especially with the developments in nearby Egypt.

It is worth mentioning here that the Libyan branch of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is a significantly different organization from the Egyptian older sister, the main target of the 2013 coup in Egypt. Two critical differences are worth highlighting. First, the Libyan MB had limited presence in the decade prior to the 2011 revolution. Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Libyan MB had almost no student activism, provided no social services, and virtually no mosques or public spaces to preach its messages. Therefore, after the revolution, it had limited popular bases compared to the Egyptian MB and even Ennahda in Tunisia. Second, the Libyan revolution was primarily a popular armed one and the MB participated in it. So, as opposed to the Egyptian and the Tunisian Islamists, the Libyan MB experience in collective armed action, within a multi-actor coalition, was much more positive. That type of armed action toppled a brutal dictatorship, and second it helped the Libyan branch to avoid the dismal fate of the mother organization in Egypt. As outlined below, these two differences will impact the political behavior of the organization.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section identifies the main Islamist forces in Libya and briefly overviews their background and their role in the transition. The second part attempts to understand the salient issues facing Libyan Islamists and how it affects their behaviors in Libya. These issues are the 2011 armed revolution, the 2012-2013 electoral process, and the 2014 attempted coup and civil war. The final part concludes with implications for the study of Islamism.

Libyan Islamist Actors: An Overview

The Libyan Muslim Brotherhood

"The Muslim Brothers established this party. We are a national civil party with an Islamic reference…we have Islamists and nationalists," said Al-Amin Belhajj, the head of the founding committee for the newly announced Justice and Construction Party.[1] With the March 3, 2012 announcement, Libya seemed set to follow the electoral path of Islamist success set in Egypt, Tunisia and other Arab countries. After decades of fierce repression of the Muslim Brotherhood by the regime of Moammar Gadhafi, the formation of a political party in Libya was a heady experience.

The Muslim Brotherhood's presence in Libya goes back to 1949. But their first clear organizational structure was developed in 1968 and quickly froze in 1969 after the coup of Colonel Gadhafi.[2] The Brotherhood was never allowed to operate openly, and suffered extreme repression. Indeed, when State TV did broadcast something about them, it was the bodies of their leaders hung from street lampposts in the mid-1980s. Gadhafi's media called them 'deviant heretics' and 'stray dogs.' Fleeing repression, the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood was reborn in the

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[1] Belhaj Al-Amin, interview by author, Tripoli, March 1, 2012.
[2] Soliman Abd al-Qadr (former General Observer of the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya), "'Ilaqat al-Ikwan ma' al-Nizam al-Libi (The relationship between the Brothers and the Libyan Regime)," interviewed by Ahmaed Mansour, Bila Hudud, al-Jazeera Arabic, August 7, 2005; Al-Naku',Mahmoud, "Al-Harakat al-Islamiyya al-Haditha fi Libya (Modern Islamist Movements in Libya)", Libya Forum for Human Development, (2010): 23.

United States, where members established the "Islamic Group – Libya" in 1980 and issued their magazine *The Muslim*. In 1982, many of the MB figures who were studying in the United States returned to Libya to re-establish the organization in the country but ended up in prison or were executed.[3]

The Libyan Muslim Brotherhood made a comeback in 1999, and entered into a dialogue with the regime. Its rebirth was bolstered in 2005 and 2006 by Saif al-Islam Gadhafi's initiatives, which aimed to co-opt and neutralize opposition groups, particularly Islamist ones.[4] This led to doubts about their motivations during the 2011 revolution, charges which Brotherhood leaders reject. "No, we did not plan the revolution and we weren't playing a double game with the regime," says Fawzi Abu Kitef*,* the head of the Revolutionary Brigades Coalition in Eastern Libya and the former deputy defense minister in the National Transitional Council (NTC), the body that politically led the revolution and then *de facto* governed Libya for a period of several months (March 2011 to August 2012), before the elections.[5] Abu Kitef was a leading figure in the Brotherhood who spent more than 18 years in Gadhafi's jails, including Abu Selim.[6] Indeed, from the outset, the Brotherhood was supportive of the NTC, with some of its icons joining it, such Dr. Abdullah Shamia, who was in charge of the economy file in the NTC.

The Libyan Muslim Brotherhood modeled its new party after Egypt's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). The Libyan MB is much smaller than its Egyptian counterpart, however. In 2009, Soliman Abd al-Qadr, the former General Overseer of the Libyan MB, estimated the numbers of MB figures in exile to be around 200 and inside Libya to be a few thousand, mainly concentrated in the professional and student sectors.[7] While those cadres will be critical for the movement and its party, they can hardly compare to the hundreds of thousands of the Egyptian Brotherhood.

During its first public conference in Benghazi in November 2011, the Libyan MB restructured the organization, elected a new leader, increased its consultative council membership from 11 to 30 leaders, and decided to form a political party. In their party elections, Muhammad Swan, the former head of the Libyan MB's Consultative Council, narrowly defeated the former MB leader Soliman Abd al-Qadr and two other candidates to become the leader of the new party, the Justice and Construction Party (JCP). "Participation in the party will be based on individual, not as group basis," says Bashir al-Kubty, the newly elected general observer of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood. He meant that the party will not be a political front.[8] "They want it to be like the FJP in Egypt, 80% MB and 20% others…to be able to say that they are inclusive," says Jum'a

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[3] Fawzi Abu Kitef (Muslim Brotherhood Leader and Head of the Revolutionary Brigades Coalition), interviewed by Ahmaed Mansour, Shahid 'Ala al-Asr. *al-Jazeera* Arabic, February 8, 2012.
[4] Soliman Abd al-Qadir (former General Observer of the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya), interviewed by Sami Kleib, Liqa' Khas, *al-Jazeera* Arabic, May 30, 2009.
[5] Fawzi Abu Kitef.
[6] Abu Selim is a maximum security prison in Tripoli, Libya. It was notorious during the rule of Moammar Gadhafi for human rights abuses, including a massacre in 1996 in which Human Rights Watch estimated that more than 1,270 prisoners were killed by the regime forces in two days.
[7] Soliman Abd al-Qadir, May 30, 2009.
[8] Bashir al-Kubty (General Observer of Libyan Muslim Brotherhood), interview by Khaled al-Mahreer, *al-Jazeera*, November 21, 2011.

al-Gumati, a former non-Islamist representative of the NTC in London.[9]

When Ali al-Sallabi, a leading Islamist activist once affiliated with the MB, proposed a National Rally Coalition to include the MB and other Islamists, the MB ultimately rejected the proposal. The objective of the MB at that phase of the transition was to have control over its political arm. It ostentatiously shuns alliances with post-jihadists (like those of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, that changed its name temporarily to the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change – LIMC before its members split into two political parties, several armed state bureaucracies such as the army or the security services, and militias) to avoid any international outcry in that period. It also rejected initiatives proposed by ex-affiliates, like al-Sallabi, as this will send a wrong message to the grassroots and the mid-ranks.[10] Domestic and international legitimacy, expansion of audience, and control of members seem to be the determinants of the Libyan MB's behavior in the current transitional period.

The emerging Libyan political scene poses several major challenges to the Libyan MB, especially prior to the 2012 elections. Unlike the MB in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia, the Islamists of Libya have little history of interactions with the masses. The MB of Egypt had a third life from the early 1970s, and during the last four decades it worked hard, under hazardous conditions, to build mass support in universities, professional syndicates, unions, and streets. The Ennahda Party in Tunisia is not much different, although the mass-support building efforts were frozen in 1990. The Libyan MB did not have any similar chances to connect with the masses. They also did not have the opportunity to build their organizational structures or institutions within Libya, or to create a parallel network of clinics and social services.

Second, Libyan Islamists had to deal with persistent questions about their commitment to democratic values, women's rights, and toleration of others. The attempt to be inclusive was clear in the party's conference on March 2-3, 2012. Walid al-Sakran, non-member of the MB, was a candidate for the party's leadership and five women attempted to join the 45-member Consultative Council. Three were successful. But even if the leadership was committed to pragmatism, the grassroots and sympathizers expect the ideology to influence the behavior. This challenge for the leadership is to legitimate its pragmatic behavior, including coalitions with non-Islamists, to their followers. The presence of many of these groups in exile in the West earlier, and the experience in ideological transitions did help ease the tension between political pragmatism and ideological commitments. This particularly applies to the MB and the LIMC, but not necessarily to the local Salafis (who are more numerous than the members of both organizations, but lack a structure and a leadership).

Third, the constitution drafting process posed and will continue to pose thorny challenges. The reference to the sharia as the principal source of legislation in article one of the constitutional declaration of August 2011 raised a few eyebrows in the West and among Libya's liberals. A similar reaction happened when Mustafa Abd al-Jalil, the chairman of the NTC, talked about the superiority of sharia and the legitimacy of polygamy in the liberation speech on October 23,

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[9] Jum'a Al-Gumati (former NTC representative in London), interview by Ali al-Zafiri, Fi al-'Umq, *al-Jazeera* Arabic, February 16, 2011.
[10] Ali Al-Sallabi, interview by author, February 1, 2012.

2011. "We are an Islamic state," he said, and he pledged to get rid of regulations that didn't conform to Islamic law.

The MB, the LIMC, Salafi, and conservative figures interviewed earlier perceived this as a victory. "The laws of Libya have to have an Islamic reference and that should be enshrined in the constitution," asserts Bashir al-Kubty.[11] "The issue of the sharia is settled. It will be the supreme source of legislation…there is no point in making this debatable or raising the Quran in Benghazi and Sabha," says Dr. Abd al-Nasser Shamata, the head of the Crisis Management Unit in the NTC. His statement was a response to demonstrations of a few hundred in Benghazi and Sabha demanding the implementation of the sharia in 2011 and 2012.[12]

The issue of the sharia will remain to be a thorny one in all of the transition and civil war phases. Libyan Islamist relative electoral successes occurred in 2012 without a thorough update of their worldviews. This exacerbated political and ideological polarization that became increasingly evident in the new Libya.

The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group

Established in 1990, the LIFG was modeled along the lines of the Egyptian al-Jihad organization: secretive, elitist, exclusively paramilitary, and aiming for a decisive action to topple the regime.[13] However, the movement was discovered by the Libyan authorities and therefore it had to declare its existence for the first time on October 18, 1995. A brutal crackdown followed and the LIFG led a three-year low-level insurgency mainly based in Eastern Libya. The group attempted to assassinate Colonel Gadhafi on three occasions in 1995 and 1996. By 1998, the Consultative Council of the LIFG, decided to impose a three-year ceasefire in Libya and to review that decision in 2001. But the events of 9/11 changed all calculations, as it put the leadership and the whole organization in survival mode.

According to the LIFG leaders and members I interviewed in Tripoli, the dialogue with the Libyan regime started in 2005. In 2006, six members from the Consultative Council were involved in talks with the regime. By the end of 2010, the LIFG published a book, *Corrective Studies in Understandings of Jihad, Enforcement of Morality, and Judgment of People*, in which it reviews the ideas and fatwas supportive of fighting against rulers as well as of judging individuals as apostates (*takfir*). In March 2010, Saif al-Islam heralded the release of the LIFG commanders and praised their book in a public conference attended by western diplomats, academics and journalists.

Like the MB and its offshoots, the LIFG and the jihadi trend have supported the February 2011 revolution, and played a significant role in the removal of Gadhafi's regime. The movement brought a wealth of paramilitary experiences to Libyan revolutionaries. The members of the movement were heavily involved in multiple armed conflicts, including in Afghanistan, Algeria, and Chechnya. But the LIFG first transformed itself into the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change (LIMC) and many of its figures are members of the Tripoli Military Council (TMC). Two

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[11] Bashir al-Kubty.
[12] Abd al-Nasser Shamata (head of Crisis Management Unit in the NTC), interview by author, June 15, 2011.
[13] Noman Benotman (former *Shura* Council Member of the LIFG), interview by author, April 27, 2010.

of its leading figures established the *Watan* (Homeland) Party and *Umma Wasat* (Central Nation) Party.

The Salafi Trend

The existence of the Salafi trend in Libya goes back to the 1960s.[14] Like in other countries, non-jihadi Salafism in Libya is divided into five sub-trends: status-quo/authoritarian Salafism, apolitical/scholarly Salafism, political/reformist Salafism, and armed Salafism. Despite being associated with Saudi theologians, status-quo Salafism was able to grow under the Gadhafi regime, mainly due to its rhetorical support of the rulers, regardless of their behavior. Like some Egyptian Salafis, many of the sheikhs of that sub-trend were against the revolution[15] and supported the status quo. Between February and August 2011, some of them were used for pro- Gadhafi propaganda, issuing statements on TV and radio to cast religious legitimacy on the regime, and de-legitimate the revolutionaries.[16]

After Gadhafi, the Salafi trend in Libya, despite its relatively large number compared to even the MB and the LIFG, suffered from a lack of leadership and organizational structures. Additionally, the ideology does not proscribe a specific political behavior.As a result , Libyan Salafis engaged in both the post-Gadhafi electoral political process and armed conflict, but on rival sides.[17]

Islamists and the 2012 Electoral Losses

"We certainly did not expect the results, but regardless...our future is certainly better than our present and our past," said Sami al-Saadi, the former ideologue of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and the founder of the al-Umma al-Wasat Party (Central Nation – CNP), which came in third in Central Tripoli.[18] Al-Saadi, once called "the Sheikh of the Arabs" by the Taliban's Mullah Omar, and author of the LIFG's anti-democracy manifesto accepted the initial indicators of Libya's non-Islamist victory.

Indeed, the results raised eyebrows, even for analysts who did not expect an Islamist landslide. In electoral district number one, where Derna lies (commonly referred to as an "Islamist stronghold"), the "liberal-leaning", non-Islamist National Forces Coalition (NFC), a coalition of more than 60 parties and hundreds of local civil society organizations, swept with 59,769 votes while the Justice and Construction Party (JCP) of the Muslim Brotherhood only got 8,619. The liberal-leaning Central National Trend (CNT) came in third with 4,962 votes.

In the west district of Abu Selim—where many Islamists are perceived as local heroes due to their sacrifices under brutal repression—the NFC still swept with 60,052 votes defeating all six Islamist parties, who together received less than 15,000 votes. Overall, liberal-leaning parties won the most votes in 11 out of the 13 electoral districts, with the NFC winning 10 of those and

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[14] Salem Mohamed (head of Salafi Forum in Libya), interview by author, June 17, 2011; Noman Benotman, interviewed by author, April 12, 2011.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Al-Ruqay'I al-Sadiq. "Al-Islamiyun fi Libya: Tarikh wa Jihad – Guz' 3 (The Islamists in Libya: History and Jihad - Part 3)," Al-Manara, January 12, 2012; Noman Benotman, April 12, 2011.
[17] Salem Mohamed.
[18] Sami al-Saadi, interview by author, Cairo, August 2012.

the CNT winning one. Overall, the NFC got 39 seats, the JCP won 17 seats and came in a distant second, and the CNT secured only two seats.

Those results only affected 80 out of the 200 seats of the 2012 General National Congress (GNC), whose mandate was to appoint a prime minister, a government, and a committee to craft the constitution. The rest of the 120 seats are assigned for individual candidates.

In some districts, the Islamists were not too far behind though. Across Libya, they consistently won the second place in 10 out of the 13 districts, with the JCP winning nine of those and the Salafi-leaning Originality Coalition (OC) wining one. In Misrata (district number nine), the JCP came in second, after the local Union for Homeland Party, but still managed to win almost three times the votes of the NFC, who came in fourth.

Islamists spearheading the opposition against Gadhafi were advised by Tunisian and Egyptian Islamists and used a rhetoric full of religious symbolism in a conservative, Muslim-majority country. Not surprisingly for some, this was not enough. It was noted earlier that a striking difference exists between the MB in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia, on the one hand, and the Islamists of Libya, on the other: the history of institutionalism and interactions with the masses. In the four decades of Gadhafi's rule, the Islamists of Libya were unable to build local support networks. They also did not have the opportunity to develop their organizational structures, hierarchies, or institutions within Libya, or create a parallel network of clinics and social services as their counterparts in Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan have done.

As a result of this organizational immaturity, the Islamists could not unite under one coalition to compete with former Prime Minister Mahmoud Jibril's NFC. Instead, Islamist votes were divided between several parties. For example, the LIFG had to split supporting votes between two large factions: al-Watan Party, led by the LIFG's former commander Abd al-Hakim Belhaj and the CNP led by the LIFG's former ideologue, Sami al-Saadi. Moreover, sometimes the Salafi-leaning OC affiliated parties competed against each other in the very same district, most notably district 11, where three of their parties came in second, seventh, and 13th in Tajoura/Souk al-Jum'a area. Additionally, the OC leaders failed to mobilize large sections in the Libyan Salafi community who boycotted the elections, mainly out of theological convictions that elections are religiously illegitimate.

Another reason for non-Islamist support is the "blood" factor. "I am not giving my family's votes to the MB. Two of my cousins died because of them," explained Mohamed Abdul Hakim a voter from Benghazi.[19] Despite believing that Islam should be the source for legislation, he still voted non-Islamist. His cousins were killed in a confrontation in the 1990s, likely between the Martyrs Movement (a small jihadist group operating in his neighborhood at that time) and Gadhafi's forces. Nevertheless, many average Libyans, including Mohamed, do not distinguish between different Islamist organizations. For many, all Islamists are "Ikhwan" (MB). The "stain" of direct involvement in armed action, coupled with the fears of enforcing Taliban-like laws or an Algerian-like scenario in the country have harmed Islamists of all brands.

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[19] Mohamed Abdul Hakim, interview by author, Benghazi, June 2012.

Islamist rhetoric during the elections campaign also resulted in a poor showing at the polls. "It is offensive to tell me you have to vote for an Islamic party. What does that make me if I voted otherwise?! In Libya we are Muslims...They can't take away my identity and claim it's only theirs," told me Jamila Marzouki, an Islamic studies graduate who voted NFC, despite wanting Islam to be the ultimate reference for Libyan laws.[20]

Other factors had to do more with the non-Islamist side. The international legitimacy and its domestic impact of Mahmoud Jibril, his tribal affiliation (Warfalla tribe is about one million, of the 6.4 million Libyans), and leadership style coupled with an electoral campaign that focused on incentives and future hopes (while also exaggerating the repercussions of an Islamist takeover while showing off his "piety") all produced good results for that camp.

Political-Military Coalitions and Regional Patrons

But if the non-Islamists were able to get a victory in election, Islamists and their allies in the GNC were able to form more effective GNC coalitions and therefore control the majority of votes. This happened mainly via forming political coalitions within the GNC and keeping these coalitions disciplined during voting. The NFC failed to do so and the subsequent reduction of its GNC-bloc led to further polarization and attempts to dissolve the GNC, most notably General Hefter's first and second coup attempts in February and May 2014.

Elections were held on June 25, 2014 for the Council of Deputies (parliament), in the middle of Libya's polarization and armed politics. Whilst all candidates ran as independents, the elections saw non-Islamist factions win the majority of seats. The election turnout was very low, however at less than 18%, compared to a 61.58% in the 2012 elections. The low turnout was mainly attributed to the escalation of armed confrontations in the country following General Hefter's May coup, which also rejected both the new elections and the GNC.

Regional Dynamics and the IS Challenge

The actions of some of the regional players have not only exacerbated the polarization in Libya, but also directly spoiled reconciliation efforts at critical junctures. The Sisi regime in Egypt is a prime example. "This man is an opportunity, sir. He is speaking about the timing…they are planning something there [in Libya]. Yes, he is speaking about a form of secret cooperation…unannounced to anyone…no one will hear or know about it….he will come to you," said General Abbas Kamel, the chief aide of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in the latest of series of leaks.[21] "The man" was Ahmed Gaddaf al-Dam, Moammar Gadhafi's cousin and chief aide pursued by Libyan authorities after the revolution as well as by the Interpol for alleged crimes against humanity. He was also recently interviewed on a local pro-regime Egyptian TV channel to publically declare his support of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS). [22]

The exact date of the leak is unknown. But it was certainly after Sisi's military coup on 3 July 2013 and before Hefter's first "television coup" on 14 February 2014. The leak revealed no

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[20] Jamila Marzouki, interview by author, Benghazi, June 2012.
[21] Omar Ashour, "The Sisi leaks and intra-regime power dynamics," al-Araby, February 17, 2015, http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/82beaa66-eeb4-4725-8dfa-d6e4f905958c
[22] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WssBlKvUbq4

secrets but shed important light on the regional dimension of the Libyan conflict. Sisi's military involvement in Libya became common knowledge in official and expert circles around November 2013. In August 2014, American officials exposed an Egyptian-Emirati secret airstrike in Tripoli, an unprecedented bombing raid by an Arab Gulf state on an Arab North African capital.[23] Further details were exposed recently of actions that clearly violated the arms embargo on Libya, and the Security Council's 1970 resolution. "We should not forget the favor of Egypt. Our ammo came from Egypt. 400 containers from there," said Saqr al-Joroushi, the commander of air forces loyal to General Khalifa Hefter and the Torbuk government, while the cheering crowd chanted "Allah akbar."[24]

In February 2014, Egypt's air force struck again. This time in Derna after Islamic State militants brutally slaughtered 21 Egyptian citizens in Sirte. After the strike, Sisi's regime sought United Nations approval for a military intervention in Libya, then for a naval blockade of the Tripoli government, while lifting the rebel embargo. All attempts were diplomatic failures.

"Sisi doesn't have credibility with, and he is in fact an opponent of, the moderate Islamists and they are already looking to use his bombings as a pretense to abandon the talks," a European diplomat in March 2015.[25] That may be an oversimplification on several levels. Whereas they are part of it, the Tripoli government is not exactly run by "moderate Islamists" but by a multi-layered coalition in which pro-revolution regionalists, such as Misratan revolutionary brigades and local council, are a very influential faction. The Tobruk government is not exactly "secular" either. It is also composed of a non-homogeneous coalition of military factions, regionalist forces, pro-Gadhafi elements, and pro-revolution ones; with the military faction – led by Khalifa Hefter – having more clout. The latter believe in the "Sisi model" of takeover, including using Salafi figures to issue supportive fatwas for repressing rivals.

The Western-backed UN strategy has an alternative route – with less bloody prospects and potentially higher chance of defeating IS and like-minded organizations without empowering a ruthless dictator in the process. The immediate objective of the strategy is to build a unity government alongside Libya's security and military forces.

But the situation in Sirte is particularly problematic. Libya Dawn, a military force operating under Libya's Chief of Staff loyal to the Tripoli Government, where members of the MB are in coalition with, has deployed the 166th Battalion around Sirte, in an attempt to take over the city center, the university, and other areas from IS loyalists. "IS forces there is estimated to be somewhere between 100-150 armed vehicles [pick-up trucks and four-by-four SUVs]" said Mohammed Abdullah, a General National Congress (Tripoli Parliament) member and the leader of the National Front Party.[26] The ground troops of Libya Dawn are not enough for a quick, decisive victory though. "The force is composed of around 300 armed vehicles," said Abdullah.

[23] David D. Kirkpatrick and Eric Schmitt, "Arab Nations Strike in Libya, Surprising U.S.," New York Times, August 25th, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/26/world/africa/egypt-and-united-arab-emirates-said-to-have-secretly-carried-out-libya-airstrikes.html?_r=0
[24] Al Jazeera Arabic, "ليبيا في الدبلوماسي الحل إمكانية -الخبر وراء ما" YouTube video, 26:01, February 18, 2015, http://youtu.be/WWEd6V2LPyQ
[25] Kirkpatrick and Schmitt.
[26] Mohammed Abdullah (General National Congress [Tripoli Parliament] member and the leader of the National Front Party), interview by author, Istanbul, March 2015.

Regardless of how the confrontation between the Tripoli government and IS goes, the strategy preferred by the Sisi regime can have disastrous consequences on Libya's already precarious situation, not to mention the rest of the region. The objective of that strategy is not about national reconciliation, social cohesion, democratization, military and security professionalism, and democratic control of armed actors. It is more about eradication of political rivals – mainly from the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist factions – empowering like-minded/loyal military generals, and installing another repressive authoritarian regime on the borders of Egypt, and - where most of the other objectives intersect - defeating IS. But the tactics employed to attain that last objective are more likely to prolong the civil war in Libya and destroy any potential for reconciliation. And with these consequences, a stronger North African version of IS is a more likely outcome.

The rise of IS poses a significant challenge, not only to the MB in Libya but also to Salafist factions, including LIFG and its offshoots. Young Libyan Islamist activists link the MB's failure in Egypt to the rise of IS in Syria and Iraq. The radical narrative and propaganda of the "Caliphate" is also compared to the gradualist approach of the MB. This has implication in terms of recruitment. And Derna is a good example of how IS loyalists steadily advanced.

Implication for study of Islamism

The Egyptian military coup of July 2013 has majorly affected the region in general and Libya in particular. The message sent by the coup to Libya, Syria, Yemen, and beyond is that of militarising politics: only arms guarantee political rights, not the constitution, not democratic institutions and certainly not votes. That message will have a few implications for Islamist political behavior as well as ideological and organizational consequences. Such consequences will affect the study of Islamism.

The Libyan Muslim Brotherhood has certainly taken a lesson from the Egyptian coup and the fate of the MB leaders and members there. One lesson is having allies with "hard-power." Powerful regional militias, factions within armed institutions and/or arming loyalists of the organization are all options that were partially implemented. Several Libyan MB figures understand that the two Islamist organizations that survived major onslaughts are Hamas and Hezbollah, mainly due to the armed wings of the two organizations. This should not be construed as a transformation towards jihadism. But it can engender a sub-category within an armed Islamist typology, mainly focused on a defensive "arms-for-survival" understanding. The level of militancy can increase however; depending on how repressive is the political environment.

The inclusion-moderation hypothesis was also affected by the post-uprising Islamist transformations. In Libya, there are two main relevant issues. The first is how political inclusion affects Islamist stances on constitutional liberalism. As seen in the GNC case, Islamist MPs attempted to use their electoral success to implement laws that contradict constitutional liberalism. The second issue is that if inclusion proves to be constantly unsustainable, which trajectory will the Islamists ultimately take in an environment in which moderation does not pay off.