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## Research Report

# Where have all the jihadists gone? The rise and mysterious fall of militant Islamist movements in Libya

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SWP Research Paper

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*Wolfram Lacher*

# Where Have All the Jihadists Gone?

The Rise and Mysterious Fall of  
Militant Islamist Movements in Libya



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for  
International and Security Affairs

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- Prevailing approaches to understanding Islamist mobilisation struggle to explain why militant Islamist movements in Libya initially spread rapidly after 2011 and then disappeared almost overnight. Their decline poses a puzzle for conventional analyses.
- Tactical choices, such as the search for protection or allies, fuelled both the rise and fall of militant Islamists. The tactical options that were in fact considered by conflict actors were also determined by social factors, such as relationships of trust they maintained and the social acceptance they enjoyed.
- The short-lived flourishing of militant Islamist movements can be understood as a fashion, among other things. Protagonists sought to socially demarcate themselves or to conform by superficially adopting Islamist rhetoric and aesthetics and then discarding them again.
- Analysing the dramatic decline of militant Islamist movements helps to understand the full range of motivations fuelling their rise. Social recognition has so far been overlooked as a motivation for armed mobilisation.
- The Libyan case shows that labels such as “Islamists” and “jihadists” need to be treated with extreme caution, particularly in the context of ongoing conflicts. External actors should first recognise that conflict parties deliberately misuse such categories, and second they should develop a precise understanding of the social environment in which militant Islamist movements operate.

**SWP Research Paper**

*Wolfram Lacher*

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## **Where Have All the Jihadists Gone? The Rise and Mysterious Fall of Militant Islamist Movements in Libya**

As in other Arab Spring countries, militant Islamist movements flourished in Libya in the first few years following the fall of the regime. After Muammar al-Gaddafi's rule ended in 2011, they were popular among many young Libyans and they benefited from an escalation in violent conflicts, which made them allies of other armed groups. But from 2016 onwards, these movements dramatically lost importance and appeal — as occurred in other regional countries at around the same time. There were obvious reasons for this: first and foremost the military defeats of militant Islamist groups and the demonisation of all Islamists by Libyan and regional media.

Nevertheless, the sudden fall of militant Islamists in Libya is puzzling. It is difficult to reconcile with the two leading explanations for jihadist mobilisation. One school of thought emphasises the role of ideological radicalisation in the spread of militant Islamist groups. It sees this radicalisation as the reason for the tenacity of such groups — a tenacity they apparently lacked in Libya. Moreover, the question arises as to why Islamist ideology suddenly lost its appeal. Another approach stresses that militant Islamists benefit from conflicts and grievances, which help them to gain followers who pursue non-ideological objectives. In Libya, however, political divisions and armed conflicts persisted after 2016, even while militant Islamists became increasingly irrelevant. When a third civil war erupted in 2019, it was widely expected that this would lead to a renewed mobilisation of jihadist groups. Nothing of the sort happened.

This study explores the question of how to explain the abrupt change of fortune of militant Islamists in Libya — and what it teaches us about the driving forces behind Islamist mobilisation. The approach chosen here is based on interviews with members and allies of militant Islamist groups, as well as with actors who observed these groups in their immediate social environment. Recurring patterns in these interviews reveal three types of mechanisms at work in the rise and fall of militant Islamist movements in Libya.



First, there are tactical considerations. Actors joined militant Islamists, entered into alliances with them, or distanced themselves from them in order to react to conflict dynamics — for example, to counter an immediate threat. This aspect is widely recognized in prevailing approaches to jihadist mobilisation.

Second, which tactical choices were plausible depended, among other things, on the social embeddedness of actors and on what was socially acceptable. Militant Islamists benefited from a dense network of trust relations with former revolutionaries dating back to their joint struggle in 2011. As a result, jihadists were able to mobilise openly in the first few years after 2011 and to become allies of their former brothers in arms in 2014. Confrontations between former revolutionaries and the Islamic State (IS) in 2016 shattered their trust in actors across the militant Islamist spectrum; old friendships broke apart. When the third civil war broke out in 2019, a renewed tactical alliance with militant Islamists was no longer an option, not only from a realpolitik perspective, but also because social ties with them had been severed.

Third, however, the rise of militant Islamists from 2011 onwards was also fuelled by the superficial appropriation of Islamist aesthetics and rhetoric by actors who wanted to stand out or conform. The abrupt disappearance of militant Islamist movements was also driven by this interplay of demarcation and imitation. In post-Gaddafi Libya, revolutionary Islamism was not least a fashion, jihadism an ephemeral youth culture. The pivotal experience of the fight against IS undoubtedly provided an important impetus for the habitus associated with Islamism to go out of fashion, and for other models for gaining social status to take its place. What requires explanation, however, is the rapidity with which this impulse spread through parts of society that had previously had little fear of contact with militant Islamists. Processes of imitation and the self-reinforcing weight of conformism can help to account for this.

The third mechanism in particular, which analyses militant Islamism in post-Gaddafi Libya as a fashion, sets this research paper apart from many previous studies on Islamist mobilisation. Studies on militant Islamist groups have predominantly focussed on their expansion and much less on their decline. This is understandable, since these groups are primarily perceived as a security problem and attract attention above all when they are involved in escalating conflicts. However, the excessive focus on mobilisation has favoured analytical approaches that cannot ad-

equately explain an evolution such as that which took place in Libya — and the Libyan case is by no means alone. Broadening the perspective to include the decline of militant Islamist movements produces a different picture of both their rise and their fall.

Such an analytical approach also makes it more straightforward to grasp the full diversity of motivations of those who joined militant Islamist groups or made pacts with them. It helps to reveal how categories such as “Islamists” and “jihadists” were often problematic when such labels were politically relevant. The protagonists of Libya’s power struggles were well aware of the demonising effect of these terms and deliberately used them in an inflationary manner. Foreign observers often adopted this practice because they did not know the designated actors and their social environment from personal experience. This study shows how diverse the motivations and the extent of ideological commitment were among those who were subsumed under the broad term “militant Islamists”.

# The Rise and Fall of Militant Islamists in Libya, 2011 – 2020

After the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, a flourishing landscape of militant Islamist groups developed in Libya. In one city after another, such groups burst into the open, took over security functions and forged alliances with other militias amidst escalating power struggles. Radical splinter groups developed into powerful Libyan offshoots of the Islamic State and made Sirte the capital of its “Tripolitania province” in 2015. At the time, it seemed as if jihadist groups in Libya were destined for a promising future.<sup>1</sup> However, just as quickly as they had spread, militant Islamists disappeared from Libya’s landscape of actors. Armed groups on both sides of the Libyan power struggle drove IS out of the cities. Former allies soon distanced themselves from less radical Islamist groups, which found themselves increasingly isolated and rapidly losing influence. Militant Islamists no longer play a role among the forces that have dominated Libyan politics since the war for Tripoli ended in June 2020.

The spread of militant Islamism in Libya had some deep roots. A considerable number of Libyans had travelled to Afghanistan to fight from the end of the 1980s. In the 1990s, some of them founded the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), which fought repeated battles with the Gaddafi regime from 1995 to 1998 before its members were either imprisoned or fled

abroad.<sup>2</sup> After the US invasion of Iraq, Libyans made up a disproportionate share of the foreign fighters there. Many of them came from only a few Libyan cities, some of which had already been LIFG strongholds.<sup>3</sup> Even then, a jihadist subculture had developed in a few Libyan cities.

During the first civil war (2011), militant Islamists were part of the revolutionary forces. They did not form their own jihadist groups, but fought side by side with non-Islamist revolutionaries. With the fall of Gaddafi, they not only became victors, but also established solid relationships with other revolutionaries.

After the revolutionaries’ victory, former LIFG leaders and militant Islamists without affiliation became members of parliament and deputy defence or interior ministers. Others set up armed groups that obtained official status and access to state funds. In this respect, Islamist actors were no different from other former revolutionaries. Although the former LIFG leaders were now often vilified as “al-Qaeda” or “terrorists” by their political opponents, there was no evidence that they continued to pursue a jihadist agenda. Instead, they founded parties and dedicated themselves to building a state according to their ideas of Islamic principles – which were basically in line with the conservative social consensus in Libya.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the militant Islamist spectrum began to differentiate itself. Jihadists who were ideologically aligned with al-Qaeda founded groups under

1 Wolfram Lacher, “Libya: A Jihadist Growth Market,” in *Jihadism in Africa. Local Causes, Regional Expansion, International Alliances*, ed. Guido Steinberg and Annette Weber, SWP Research Paper 5/2015 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2015), 31 – 50, [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research\\_papers/2015\\_RP05\\_sbg\\_web.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2015_RP05_sbg_web.pdf); Daniel Byman, “The Homecomings: What Happens When Arab Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria Return?” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 8 (2015): 581 – 602; International Crisis Group (ICG), *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State* (Brussels, March 2016), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/exploiting-disorder-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state>.

2 Mary Fitzgerald, “Finding Their Place – Libya’s Islamists during and after the 2011 Uprising”, in *The Libyan Revolution and Its Aftermath*, ed. Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn (London: Hurst Publishers, 2015), 177 – 204; Lacher, “Libya: Growth Market” (see note 1).

3 Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qa’ida’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, Lincoln Hall, U.S. Military Academy, December 2007).

4 Fitzgerald, “Finding Their Place” (see note 2).

the name Ansar al-Sharia in several cities in 2012. These and other groups channelled recruits from Libya and other North African countries to Syria, where they joined the Nusra Front and later the Islamic State.<sup>5</sup> In Benghazi and Darna, the murder of former army officers and intelligence officers became increasingly frequent. Although these cases were never solved and presumably had various contexts, suspicion fell on Ansar al-Sharia and other jihadists, who were particularly active in those cities. However, Ansar al-Sharia retained a remarkable degree of social acceptance, for example by providing security for Benghazi's main hospital or campaigning against drug use.<sup>6</sup>

The second civil war (2014–2015) gave militant Islamists an enormous boost. In Benghazi, former revolutionaries formed an alliance with Ansar al-Sharia to fight against the armed groups led by the renegade officer Khalifa Haftar. Haftar's opponents in western Libya, above all the armed groups of Misrata, supported the alliance with Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi politically, in the media and logistically. Local branches of the Islamic State were formed in Benghazi and Darna. They benefited from the fact that Haftar's opponents initially did not fight them, as they did not want to open two fronts simultaneously. For similar reasons, the Islamic State succeeded in bringing Sirte under its control: The city lay between the frontlines, and neither Misrata's armed groups nor their opponents to the east of Sirte wanted to devote valuable resources to occupying it. IS was therefore able to operate and recruit openly. Many of Haftar's opponents minimised the IS problem and also played down the danger posed by extremists in their own camp.<sup>7</sup>

5 Nate Rosenblatt, *All Jihad Is Local. What ISIS' Files Tell Us about Its Fighters* (Washington, DC: New America, July 2016), <https://na-production.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/ISIS-Files.pdf>; ICG, *How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb* (Brussels, July 2017), [https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/178-how-the-islamic-state-rose\\_0.pdf](https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/178-how-the-islamic-state-rose_0.pdf); Alexander Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

6 Mary Fitzgerald, "Jihadism and Its Relationship with Youth Culture and Ideology: The Case of Ansar al-Sharia in Libya," in *Inside Wars. Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya*, ed. Luigi Narbone, Agnès Favier and Virginie Collombier (Florence: European University Institute, 2016), 44–48, [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/41644/Inside%20wars\\_2016.pdf](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/41644/Inside%20wars_2016.pdf).

7 David D. Kirkpatrick, "ISIS Finds New Frontier in Chaotic Libya," *The New York Times*, 10 March 2015; David D. Kirk-

## Haftar's opponents initially did not fight the Islamic State – until it became too great a threat.

The turning point came when IS finally became too great a threat. In September 2015, former revolutionaries in Darna – including militant Islamists – declared war on the IS offshoot there. This confrontation ended in April 2016 with the defeat and flight of the remaining IS fighters. In Sabratha, where IS had not openly appeared but was increasingly committing murders and kidnappings, local armed groups used a US airstrike in February 2016 to drive IS out of the city, amidst battles lasting several days. IS's attempts to expand from Sirte – by far the group's largest presence in Libya – towards Misrata triggered a major offensive by Misratan armed groups in May 2016. In December 2016, they captured the last streets in Sirte where IS was still holding out. These confrontations made it impossible for Haftar's opponents to continue to trivialise the danger posed by extremists. The result was an extensive distancing from militant Islamists.<sup>8</sup>

The IS presence in Benghazi ended when its fighters fled the city in January 2017, by which time Ansar al-Sharia had effectively ceased to exist as an organisation. Other opponents of Haftar in Benghazi continued to fight until their defeat in December 2017. Many IS members who had escaped from the cities into the desert of central and southern Libya fell victim to American airstrikes. The last eastern Libyan city outside Haftar's control was Darna. As in Benghazi, not all his opponents in Darna were militant Islamists – but the latter formed the committed core, which was only defeated in February 2019 after an almost year-long battle.<sup>9</sup>

This meant that both the Islamic State and several other militant Islamist groups had been militarily defeated. Foreign analysts, however, continued to stress the potential danger of renewed jihadist mobilisation. Libya remained politically divided, and vio-

patrick, Ben Hubbard and Eric Schmitt, "ISIS' Grip on Libyan City Gives It a Fallback Option," *The New York Times*, 28 November 2015.

8 ICG, *How the Islamic State Rose* (see note 5).

9 Al-Zubayr Salem, *The War in Derna: What's Happening Now, and What's Next* (Florence: European University Institute, June 2018), [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/56084/PolicyBrief\\_2018\\_09%28EN%29.pdf](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/56084/PolicyBrief_2018_09%28EN%29.pdf); Interview 18 (leading figure in Abu Salim Brigade and Darna Protection Force, al-Sdada, November 2018); Interview 32 (journalist from Darna, Istanbul, March 2023).

lence and repression by Haftar's forces and other militias did not create lasting security, but instead a breeding ground for new radicalisation.<sup>10</sup> When Haftar attacked Tripoli in April 2019, triggering a third civil war, many well-informed observers warned that the conflict — like the one in Benghazi — would give a new impetus to jihadist mobilisation.<sup>11</sup> But this did not happen. Militant Islamists played no role in the fourteen-month war. Individual fighters may have had links to militant Islamist groups in earlier phases of the conflict, but now they were fighting in militias that rejected Islamist ideology. The leaders of these organisations ensured that figures who were — often wrongly — labelled as extremists were kept away from their units.<sup>12</sup>

Even after Haftar's defeat and the end of the war over Tripoli, militant Islamists were unable to regain any significant influence. Perhaps most surprisingly, there were hardly any signs of continued underground mobilisation, no splinter groups that remained wedded to the armed struggle for an Islamic state according to their own ideas. Militant Islamism appeared to have been defeated not only militarily, but also ideologically and morally — at least for the time being.

## Who were the Islamists?

Part of the answer to the question of how to explain the sudden disappearance of Libya's militant Islamists

is that many supposed Islamists never actually were as such. After 2011, numerous political actors and media in Libya and the wider region used "Islamist" as a stigmatic term. Political opponents were branded as Islamists in order to discredit them. It was commonplace to label someone a Muslim Brother or to slander them as an al-Qaeda member without any basis. International media, diplomats and analysts often adopted such categorising. Numerous articles stated, for example, that the paramilitary Libya Shield Forces were close to the Muslim Brotherhood or that Misrata's armed groups were Islamist — both of which were simply false.<sup>13</sup>

This misrepresentation repeated from one article to the next became widely accepted fact. The struggle over the conflict's narratives that drove this dynamic was particularly virulent during the second civil war in 2014–2015. In the 2019–2020 war over Tripoli, pro-Haftar propagandists once again tried to stigmatise their opponents as Islamists and terrorists.<sup>14</sup> Since Haftar's defeat, there has been much less recourse to such propaganda, thereby strengthening the impression that the influence of Islamists in Libya has greatly diminished. In fact, however, this influence had previously been excessively inflated.

Nevertheless, this development only partially explains why militant Islamists were in the spotlight until 2016 and have almost completely disappeared from it since 2020. In addition to fabrications and often inaccurate reporting, there has also been an actual rise and fall in militant Islamist movements. What requires explanation, then, is why many actors maintained close ties with militant Islamists in the first few years after 2011, which in turn made it easier for their opponents to brand them Islamists as well, before increasingly distancing themselves from Islamists from 2015 onwards.

**10** ICG, *How the Islamic State Rose* (see note 5); Frederic Wehrey, "When the Islamic State Came to Libya," *The Atlantic*, 10 February 2018; Mary Fitzgerald, "What Happened to Political Islam in Libya?" in *The Arc of Crisis in the MENA Region. Fragmentation, Decentralisation, and Islamist Opposition*, ed. Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli (Milan: Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale/Atlantic Council, 2018), 123–34, [https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/arc\\_of\\_crisis\\_web\\_defdef\\_0.pdf](https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/arc_of_crisis_web_defdef_0.pdf).

**11** ICG, *Averting a Full-blown War in Libya* (Brussels, April 2019), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/averting-full-blown-war-libya>; David D. Kirkpatrick, "Thugs and Extremists Join Battle for Tripoli, Complicating Libyan Fray," *The New York Times*, 12 April 2019; Frederic Wehrey and Emadeddin Badi, "Libya's Coming Forever War: Why Backing One Militia Against Another Is Not the Solution," *War on the Rocks* (online), 15 May 2019.

**12** Wolfram Lacher, *Who Is Fighting Whom in Tripoli? How the 2019 Civil War Is Transforming Libya's Military Landscape* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, August 2019), <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-SANA-BP-Tripoli-2019.pdf>.

**13** See, e.g., Patrick Markey and Aziz El Yaakoubi, "Town vs. Town, Faction vs. Faction as Libya Descends into 'Hurricane'," *Reuters*, 31 July 2014; Borzou Daragahi, "Libyan Islamists Push Hardline Agenda amid the Chaos They Created," *Financial Times*, 21 September 2014; Jason Pack, Karim Mezran and Mohamed Eljarh, *Libya's Faustian Bargains: Breaking the Appeasement Cycle* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, May 2014), [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Libya\\_Faustian\\_Bargains.pdf](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Libya_Faustian_Bargains.pdf); Lisa Watanabe, *Islamist Actors: Libya and Tunisia* (Zurich: Center for Security Studies, June 2018), <https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/a9015e51-5197-4f68-af90-6a744cfcaf8>.

**14** Lacher, *Who Is Fighting Whom?* (see note 12).

# Analyses of Militant Islamist Mobilisation — and the Libyan Puzzle

Over the past two decades, both social science research and policy-oriented analysis has dealt extensively with the question of how and why militant Islamist movements spread. By contrast, how to explain their decline has rarely been the subject of investigation. And yet whether or not explanations for militant Islamism are valid should also be examined in terms of whether they can account for its decline.

Prevailing approaches to explaining militant Islamist mobilisation differ primarily in how they assess the role of ideology as compared to other drivers of mobilisation. Simplistic positions, which either declare ideology to be the most important factor or reject it altogether, no longer dominate the academic debate. Another theoretical divide is also gradually being overcome: between the tendency to dismiss ideology as merely an instrument in the hands of elites and the assumption that members of ideologically defined groups are ‘true believers’ whose actions are guided by their beliefs. A number of studies show that ideology can fulfil these two functions and more within the same organisation.<sup>15</sup>

Among politicians and security authorities, however, the vague concept of radicalisation is still very popular, and is often associated with a strong focus on ideology.<sup>16</sup> Nuanced academic approaches, on the

other hand, view the internalisation of extremist ideology as *one* aspect of radicalisation processes that are often driven more by social isolation and violent confrontation.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, it is widely assumed that ideological socialisation and indoctrination make militant Islamist groups particularly tough and resilient. The very category of a “jihadist group” implies that this is a *sui generis* actor whose peculiarity lies in the particularly important role of ideology.<sup>18</sup> Some detect an “extremist’s advantage” in using ideology to strengthen trust between members of an armed group and thus also its fighting power.<sup>19</sup> Fewer analysts note that the proportion of hardened ideologues varies considerably from one group to the next.<sup>20</sup>

*of a Controversial Concept* (Frankfurt: Hessian Foundation for Peace and Conflict Research [HSFK], 2018), [https://www.prif.org/fileadmin/HSFK/hsfk\\_publicationen/prif0518.pdf](https://www.prif.org/fileadmin/HSFK/hsfk_publicationen/prif0518.pdf).

**17** Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 3 (2008): 415–33; Randy Borum, “Radicalisation into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011): 7–36; Donatella della Porta, “Radicalization: A Relational Perspective,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (2018): 461–74.

**18** Thurston, *Jihadists* (see note 5); Stathis N. Kalyvas, “Jihadi Rebels in Civil War,” *Daedalus* 147, no. 1 (2018): 36–47; Desirée Nilsson and Isak Svensson, “The Intractability of Islamist Insurgencies: Islamist Rebels and the Recurrence of Civil War,” *International Studies Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2021): 620–32.

**19** Barbara F. Walter, “The Extremist’s Advantage in Civil Wars,” *International Security* 42, no. 2 (2017): 7–39.

**20** Raphaël Lefèvre, *Jihad in the City. Militant Islam and Contentious Politics in Tripoli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). The same applies to the realisation that the increasing recruitment of less convinced members can lead to the hard, ideological core of a group losing confidence in its fellow

**15** Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Elisabeth Jean Wood, “Ideology in Civil War: Instrumental Adoption and Beyond,” *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 213–26; Jonathan Leader Maynard, “Ideology and Armed Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 5 (2019): pp. 635–49; Thurston, *Jihadists* (see note 5).

**16** Anthony Richards, “From Terrorism to ‘Radicalisation’ to ‘Extremism’: Counterterrorism Imperative or Loss of Focus?” *International Affairs* 91, no. 2 (2015): 371–80; Hande Abay Gaspar, Christopher Daase, Nicole Deitelhoff, Julian Junk and Manjana Sold, *What is Radicalisation? Clarifications*



Conventional wisdom would therefore suggest that ideology gives militant Islamists in Libya cohesion, making them an extraordinarily tenacious political and military force. The sudden decline of militant Islamist groups then raises the question of what role ideology actually played in these groups. This is relevant beyond the case of Libya. During the same period, the formerly flourishing jihadist movement in neighbouring Tunisia also rapidly lost popularity.<sup>21</sup>

The other analytical school also reaches the limits of its explanatory power with the Libyan case: the school that focuses on non-ideological drivers of jihadist mobilisation. Over the past two decades, it has been common among social scientists, think tanks and non-governmental organisations to see the recruitment and mobilisation successes of jihadist groups primarily as a symptom of fundamental political and social grievances. Arbitrary repression by authoritarian regimes radicalises opposition groups – for example in prisons where young people who have been unjustly arrested are imprisoned together with committed ideologues.<sup>22</sup>

Policy-oriented analyses of jihadist groups as parties to civil wars often emphasise that the rise of these groups can be explained by tactical alliances or by the search for protection against state security forces and their foreign supporters.<sup>23</sup> They stress that the counter-terrorism campaign of the USA and allied states after 2001 proved extremely counterproductive due to the civilian harm it caused; indeed, it provided jihadists

with a “recruitment bonanza”.<sup>24</sup> In the states of the Sahel, identity-based persecution drove entire population groups into the arms of jihadists.<sup>25</sup> Socio-economic grievances and resentment of economic orders that are perceived as unjust, as well as financial incentives, are also cited as important factors in joining jihadist groups.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, the fight against these groups primarily requires tackling the fundamental drivers of conflicts as well as building a fairer, more effective state.

There is extensive empirical evidence of links between the perception of arbitrary or collective threats and successful recruitment by jihadist groups. This does not detract from the fact that certain conditions can reverse such correlations, for example if the state’s capacity for repression is so strong that even massive injustice does not encourage militant mobilisation, but rather inhibits it.<sup>27</sup>

24 Brynjar Lia, “Jihadism in the Arab World after 2011: Explaining Its Expansion,” *Middle East Policy* 23, no. 4 (2016): 74–91.

25 Caitriona Dowd, “Grievances, Governance and Islamist Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 53, no. 4 (2015): 505–31; ICG, *The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso’s North* (Brussels, October 2017), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/254-social-roots-jihadist-violence-burkina-faso-north>; Tor A. Benjaminsen and Boubacar Ba, “Why Do Pastoralists in Mali Join Jihadist Groups? A Political Ecological Explanation,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 46, no. 1 (2019): 1–20; Luca Raineri, “Explaining the Rise of Jihadism in Africa: The Crucial Case of the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 8 (2022): 1632–46.

26 Luca Raineri and Francesco Strazzari, “State, Secession, and Jihad: The Micropolitical Economy of Conflict in Northern Mali,” *African Security* 8, no. 4 (2015): 249–71; Fabio Merone, “Between Social Contention and *Takfirism*: The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Tunisia,” *Mediterranean Politics* 22, no. 1 (2017): 71–90; Clara-Auguste Süß and Ahmad Noor Aakhunzzada, *The Socioeconomic Dimension of Islamist Radicalisation in Egypt and Tunisia* (Frankfurt: HSFK, February 2019), [https://www.prif.org/fileadmin/HSFK/hsfk\\_publicationen/PRIF\\_WP\\_45.pdf](https://www.prif.org/fileadmin/HSFK/hsfk_publicationen/PRIF_WP_45.pdf); Natasja Rupesinghe and Morten Bøås, *Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Mali* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, and New York: United Nations Development Programme, May 2019), <https://www.undp.org/fr/mali/publications/rapport-extremisme-violent-dans-le-centre-du-mali>; Khalid Mustafa Medani, *Black Markets and Militants. Informal Networks in the Middle East and Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

27 Doha Abdelgawad, “Why Were They Not Radicalised? Young Members of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Aftermath of Egypt’s 2013 Military Coup,” *Middle East Journal* 76,

fighters. See Theodore McLauchlin, *Desertion. Trust and Mistrust in Civil Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

21 ICG, *Jihadisme en Tunisie: Eviter la recrudescence des violences* (Brussels, June 2021), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/b083-jihadisme-en-tunisie-eviter-la-recrudescence-des-violences>.

22 Mohammed M. Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel. Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003).

23 ICG, *Exploiting Disorder* (see note 1); Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS. Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015); Mathieu Pellerin, *Les violences armées au Sahara. Du djihadisme aux insurrections?* (Paris: Institut français des relations internationales [Ifri], November 2019), [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pellerin\\_violence\\_armees\\_sahara\\_2019\\_002.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pellerin_violence_armees_sahara_2019_002.pdf); Adam Sandor and Aurélie Campana, “Les groupes djihadistes au Mali, entre violence, recherche de légitimité et politiques locales,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue canadienne des études africaines* 53, no. 3 (2019): 415–30; Aisha Ahmad and Ousmane Diallo, “A Winning Team of Losers: The Logic of Jihadist Coalitions in Civil Wars,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 8, no. 1 (2022): 1–17.

And yet, developments in Libya suggest that such explanations ignore important aspects. After all, Libya's militant Islamists underwent rapid expansion in the first two years after the fall of Gaddafi, when the conflicts had not yet escalated, but when Islamists were no longer subject to repression either. Above all, however, conflicts continued to rage in Libya in the years after 2016, even as militant Islamist movements grew increasingly marginalised as actors in these conflicts. Contrary to general expectations, the latter also applied to the war over Tripoli in 2019. And Libya is not an isolated case: in conflicts such as in Somalia or Iraq, jihadists gained importance at times when they offered themselves as allies to other actors and lost this importance once again when they became a threat to their allies.<sup>28</sup>

Both ideology and conflict dynamics therefore provide insufficient explanations for the decline of militant Islamist movements in Libya.

## What are militant Islamists?

When searching for an appropriate explanation, it is first necessary to define the object of the analysis: militant Islamist movements. We are not simply looking at terrorism: the latter is *one* tactic among others that militant Islamist movements can potentially use — depending on the balance of power they find themselves in with their opponents.<sup>29</sup> The terms “extremism” and “radicalisation” also do not necessarily apply, because extremism is always relative: extreme in comparison to socially accepted ideas.<sup>30</sup>

The literature on radicalisation is mainly concerned with individuals, tight circles or small underground groups that isolate themselves from society. The few existing studies of the decline of militant Islamist groups explicitly concentrate on terrorist groups. They emphasise military dynamics and aspects resulting from the strict isolation of these

organisations from the societies that surrounded them.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, Libya's militant Islamists developed largely openly in the first few years after 2011 and enjoyed considerable social acceptance. This is not the only reason why it makes sense to view them as social movements.

Social movement theory has long been applied to both violent and civilian Islamist groups; it also provides part of the conceptual toolkit for understanding the Libyan case. This includes the importance of political opportunity structures, access to resources that enable mobilisation, and the varying resonance of narratives and frames.<sup>32</sup>

Analyses of Islamist movements fall into two camps when it comes to categorising them: those that emphasise the differences between various tendencies and those that group all Islamists together.<sup>33</sup> Social scientists in the first camp seek to differentiate between violent Islamists and moderate, civilian movements. They usually use the term “jihadism” for the former and “Islamism” or “political Islam” for the latter.<sup>34</sup> In the second camp, authoritarian governments from the Persian Gulf to North Africa use “Islamists” and “terrorists” as interchangeable terms for all their political opponents. In Western public discourse, right-wing social scientists and scholars of Islam also adopt this generalisation, and in countries such as Germany, the media and the authorities increasingly use “Islamist” as a synonym for “terrorist”.<sup>35</sup> There is no need to explain here that this

31 Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends. Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Julie Chernov Hwang, *Why Terrorists Quit. The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

32 Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Introduction: Islamic Activism and Social Movement Theory,” in *Islamic Activism. A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 1–33; Jerome Devon, “Can (Salafi) Jihadi Insurgents Politicise and Become Pragmatic in Civil Wars? Social Movement Restraint in Ahrar al-Sham in Syria,” *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 5, no. 3–6 (2020): 189–205.

33 Marc Lynch, “In the Same Basket, or Not?” *Diwan* (blog), 28 April 2017, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/68779>.

34 Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): 207–39; Marc Lynch, “Islam Divided between Salafi-jihad and the *Ikhwan*,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 6 (2010): 467–87.

35 Hanna Pfeifer, Regine Schwab and Clara-Auguste Süß, “Who Are These ‘Islamists’ Everyone Talks About?! Why Academic Struggles over Words Matter,” *PRIF blog* (Blog),

no. 3 (2022): 360–82; Colin Powers et al, “Why Individuals and Communities Do Not Turn to Violent Extremism,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 17, no. 1 (2023): 1–17; Yuri M. Zhukov, “Repression Works (Just Not in Moderation),” *Comparative Political Studies* 56, no. 11 (2023): 1663–94.

28 Zachary Devlin-Foltz and Binnur Ozkececi-Taner, “State Collapse and Islamist Extremism: Re-evaluating the Link,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 31, no. 1 (2010): 88–113.

29 Kalyvas, “Jihadi Rebels” (see note 18).

30 Peter R. Neumann, “The Trouble with Radicalisation,” *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 873–93.

equivalency is fundamentally wrong, regardless of whether it is based on political motivation or ignorance.<sup>36</sup>

### **The term “jihadism” is ill-suited to adequately describing Libyan realities.**

The term “militant Islamism,” as used in this study, distinguishes itself from both camps. Militant Islamism can be defined as violent mobilisation that is based on an Islamic idiom and pursues the declared aim of reshaping the political and social order. This definition is explicitly broader than the category of jihadism — a term that is itself rather controversial. The use of “jihadism” generally assumes that this denotes a clearly defined doctrinal school — which, however, turns out to be incorrect on closer inspection.<sup>37</sup>

The Libyan context alone offers several examples of how ambivalent the term “jihadism” is: after all, the fight against Italian colonisation entered collective memory as a jihad and was mythologised as such by Gaddafi.<sup>38</sup> In the post-Gaddafi era, the supposed anti-Islamist Haftar and so-called Madkhalists in the ranks of his forces also called for jihad.<sup>39</sup> And yet, the Madkhalists are reactionary Salafists whose doctrine above all emphasises absolute obedience to the ruler and is actually regarded by Islamic scholars as quietist,

and hence incompatible with Salafist jihadism.<sup>40</sup>

Due to their explicitly reactionary agenda, they do not fall under the definition of “militant Islamism,” whose period of decline in Libya was also that of the Madkhalists’ expansion.

The fact that this study examines not only Salafist jihadist groups, but militant Islamism more broadly, is also due to Libyan realities. The country’s Salafist jihadist groups cannot be separated from other Islamist movements as easily as those who prefer to emphasise differences and nuances would suggest. As this study shows, jihadist groups gained their initial strength not least from their many links with Islamists who were more flexible in their approach to ideology. Moreover, moderate, civilian Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood were evidently exposed to much the same dynamics as the militant forces, since the decline encompassed the entire Islamist spectrum. This also speaks in favour of not limiting the analysis to groups that were ideologically aligned with al-Qaeda or the Islamic State.

## **Methodology**

This study identifies mechanisms at work in the expansion and decline of militant Islamist mobilisation as seen in Libya between 2011 and 2020. These mechanisms partly follow prevailing approaches, but go beyond them. They were developed from recurring patterns that the author discerned from 39 interviews. The interviewees included former leaders, members and allies of militant Islamist groups as well as other actors and observers who closely followed the rise and decline of such groups in their social environment.

The majority of these interviews were conducted in Libya and Istanbul in 2022–2023. By that time, militant Islamists were no longer relevant actors in the conflict. This enabled conversations that were generally more open and less characterised by politically motivated distortion than was the case when the groups in question were active. This is another reason

3 December 2020, <https://blog.prif.org/2020/12/03/who-are-these-islamists-everyone-talks-about-why-academic-struggles-over-words-matter/>.

36 Hazim Fouad and Behnam Said, „Islamism, Salafism, Jihadism. Hintergründe zur Historie und Begriffsbestimmung“, *Federal Agency for Civic Education* (online), 17 December 2020, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/infodienst/322920/islamismus-salafismus-dschihadismus/>; Lynch, „In the Same Basket“ (see note 33); Pfeifer, Schwab and Süß, „Who Are These ‘Islamists?’“ (see note 35).

37 Thomas Hegghammer, „Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism,” in *Global Salafism. Islam’s New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (London: Hurst Publishers, 2009), 245–66; Darryl Li, „A Jihadism Anti-Primer,” *Middle East Report* 276 (2015): 12–17; ICG, *Exploiting Disorder* (see note 1), 2.

38 Clémence Weulersse, „Histoire et révolution en Libye,” *L’Année du Maghreb* 2 (2007): 249–60.

39 Statement by Ashraf al-Mayyar in support of Haftar, *al-Assema TV*, 10 June 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&a&feature=youtu.be&v=r4v\\_sKiYDNs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&a&feature=youtu.be&v=r4v_sKiYDNs); „Khalifa Haftar Declares Jihad and General Mobilisation to Counter Turkish Military Intervention in Libya” (Arabic), *France24*, 4 January 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/5t5839mzhhh>.

40 On the issue of quietism as it concerns the Madkhali Salafists, see Laurent Bonnefoy, „Quietist Salafis, the Arab Spring and the Politicisation Process,” in *Salafism after the Arab Awakening. Contending with People’s Power*, ed. Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 205–18; Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars, *Salafism in the Maghreb. Politics, Piety, and Militancy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).



why it can be advantageous to examine Islamist mobilisation after it has subsided. Where the interviewees tended towards ex post facto rationalisation, the author was able to compare their assessments with his own, which he gained from discussions with the same groups of actors in the years following 2011 — at a time when militant Islamist groups were rapidly growing.

# Social Mechanisms in the Rise and Fall of Militant Islamists

Many of the patterns that are emphasised by prevailing approaches to jihadist mobilisation are also visible in the spread of militant Islamist groups in Libya. Young men joined these groups, and other militias made pacts with them to defend themselves against threats from third parties or because they assumed that militant Islamists had the best military prospects. Such mechanisms are summarised below as *tactical logics of action*. Tactical considerations can also help to explain the decline of militant Islamists — namely when such groups no longer had any chance of prevailing militarily and could no longer offer protection, and having connections to them became a vulnerability.

However, such tactical logics of action do not explain why militant Islamists in Libya expanded rapidly in the period 2012–2014, although they were not yet operating in the context of an open conflict at that time. They also do not provide a sufficient answer to the question of why militant Islamists did not benefit from the outbreak of the war over Tripoli in 2019, as they did in the second civil war in 2014–2015. Two other social mechanisms offer complementary explanations. Firstly, their *social embeddedness* made it easier for militant Islamists to gain social acceptance through mutual trust, loyalty and consensual ideological discourse. The decline of militant Islamist movements therefore also manifested itself as increasing social isolation, as a distancing of their former allies and followers, along with a shift in societal discourse. A final mechanism — the *search for social recognition* — helps to understand how dynamically and rapidly such processes of association and dissociation can take place. Of relevance here is the dialectical relationship between the quest for distinction and for conformity.

## Rise: Tactical logics of action

Tactical considerations propelled both the rise of militant Islamists and their fall. These include a spectrum of logics of action ranging from pure opportunism to tactical radicalisation and emotionally charged acts of revenge. It is often difficult to judge whether actors operated out of sober calculation or emotional affect; in many cases, both may have played a role. What these logics of action have in common is that they reflect reactions to the conflict or expectations about its future course.

One example of how difficult it is to separate different motivations is the tolerance of many actors for militant Islamists in the period 2011–2014. As shown below (page 20ff), this tolerance was partly rooted in social proximity and loyalties that go back to the 2011 war. However, the question of whether actors felt threatened by militant Islamists — or whether their violence was rather directed against their political opponents — played an equally important role.

In Benghazi, many leaders of revolutionary groups considered themselves Islamists and displayed a certain lenience towards the murders in the city — at least some of which were certainly attributable to militant Islamists. A leading figure in the Rafallah Sahati Brigade told the author in November 2012 that former intelligence officers had only themselves to blame if they fell victim to murders, as their mere presence threatened social peace. According to him, the extremists responsible for some of the murders could be appeased by excluding former regime officials from political life.<sup>41</sup> In Darna, the leaders of the most powerful armed group, the Abu Salim Brigade, had a similar perspective on the killings in their

41 Interview 1 (Leading figure in Rafallah Sahati Brigade, Tripoli, November 2012).

city.<sup>42</sup> In April 2014, a leading figure in the Muslim Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party (JCP) admitted that jihadists were probably responsible for some of the murders in Benghazi, but at the same time played down the danger posed by Ansar al-Sharia.<sup>43</sup>

This forbearing attitude also explains why extremists who later joined Ansar al-Sharia or IS were sometimes able to operate under the guise of state institutions, such as the Supreme Security Committee, in the first few years after 2011 and thus gained access to state resources — such as in Sirte.<sup>44</sup> It is obvious that such access to resources had to be conducive to mobilisation, as emphasised by theories of social movements as well as analyses of Islamist groups in other contexts.<sup>45</sup>

It is not always clear at what point it changed from being a question of tolerance to one of alliances. However, the more the conflicts escalated, the more actors were willing to make pacts with militant Islamists. For example, a revolutionary commander in Sabratha said in retrospect about the involvement of later IS members in the town's armed groups: "We knew them, we tolerated them until they started kidnapping and killing people. Before that, we didn't care about them, and we thought it was good that they were supporting the fight against Assad in Syria. In the 2014 war, we were already aware of Abdallah Haftar's [later head of IS in Sabratha] inclination towards IS, but he fought with us as an individual, he didn't have his own group. However, we decided to only give him heat-seeking missiles one by one — because we knew we could soon be in conflict with him and his kind. We never considered IS as an ally — they were just individuals fighting with us."<sup>46</sup>

In Benghazi, it became particularly clear how conflict dynamics contributed to the formation of alliances

with militant Islamists. The alliance formed between the main revolutionary armed groups and Ansar al-Sharia in the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (*Majlis Shura Thuwwar Benghazi*, MSTB) in June 2014 was a direct reaction to the attacks they had been subjected to by Haftar's alliance since May. "This is a counter-revolution! Haftar has not only attacked Ansar al-Sharia, but also the revolutionaries. Of course we are now fighting together against Haftar," one of the leaders of the alliance told the author at the time.<sup>47</sup>

Voices that opposed this alliance — not least for tactical reasons — were in the minority. Prominent among them was Ziyad Balam, head of the Omar al-Mukhtar Brigade, who refused to join the Shura Council.<sup>48</sup> According to Balam, he warned the leader of the Shura Council, Wissam ben Hamid, against allying with Ansar al-Sharia: "I told Wissam: 'Foreign governments regard Ansar al-Sharia as al-Qaeda, and here in Libya they are associated with the assassinations. Foreign fighter jets will come and bomb you.' But Wissam dismissed the warning — he thought he could quickly defeat Haftar, make peace with Haftar's allies and then once again distance himself from Ansar al-Sharia."<sup>49</sup>

Such logic later repeated itself in a modified form, after Haftar's opponents, having been driven out of Benghazi, realised how much the alliance with jihadists had harmed them. By forming the Benghazi Defence Companies (*Saraya al-Difa' an Benghazi*), they actually sought to distance themselves from jihadists, as explained below (page 18ff). However, in order to reach Benghazi from central Libya, they collaborated with fighters from Ajdabiya who were accused of having links to jihadists. At the time, the group's leaders defended this approach: "It is true that Usama al-Jadhran used to be with Ansar al-Sharia and is now with us, but he is not really religious. We need him until Ajdabiya, then we can get rid of him."<sup>50</sup> But in

<sup>42</sup> Interview 32 (see note 9).

<sup>43</sup> Interview 3 (Leading cadre in the Justice and Construction Party, which is close to the Muslim Brotherhood, Misrata, April 2014).

<sup>44</sup> Virginie Collombier, "Sirte's Tribes under the Islamic State: From Civil War to Global Jihadism," in *Tribes and Global Jihadism*, ed. Virginie Collombier and Olivier Roy (London: Hurst Publishers, 2017), 153–80.

<sup>45</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, *Your Sons Are at Your Service. Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Medani, *Black Markets and Militants* (see note 26); Aisha Ahmad, "The Long Jihad: The Boom-Bust Cycle behind Jihadist Durability," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (2021): 1–17.

<sup>46</sup> Interview 36 (former leader in revolutionary armed groups, Sabratha, December 2023).

<sup>47</sup> Interview 4 (Leading figure in Rafallah Sahati Brigade, Tripoli, June 2014).

<sup>48</sup> Interview 7 (former leader of the 17 February Brigade, Berlin, December 2014); interview 27 (former leader of the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council, Istanbul, March 2023); interview 28 (former leader of the Rafallah Sahati Brigade and the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council, Istanbul, March 2023).

<sup>49</sup> Interview 37 (Ziyad Balam, former leader of the Omar al-Mukhtar Brigade and founding member of the Benghazi Defence Companies, Misrata, December 2023).

<sup>50</sup> Interview 16 (Army officer and leading figure in Benghazi Defence Companies, Tripoli, March 2017). The United

retrospect, the group's most important figure, Ismail Sallabi, admitted: "The problem lay in our alliance with Ajdabiya, with Jadhra's people. They had their own connections with extremists, and we had little influence over the composition of their group."<sup>51</sup>

One of the most controversial issues is the relationship between Haftar's opponents in Benghazi and the local branch of the Islamic State. While the Haftar camp demonised all opponents as *Dawaesh* (IS members), his opponents often denied any alliance with IS. With the passage of time, a more nuanced picture has emerged. In the words of one member of the Shura Council: "When IS supporters appeared, many of our fighters said: 'Let them fight, the defence of our city unites us.' Others confronted Wissam [ben Hamid], asking how he could fight alongside IS. Wissam replied that he was not in a position to fight the group."<sup>52</sup>

Another member of the Shura Council confirmed this: "After Haftar's militias attacked our homes in October 2014, we were forced to withdraw into the city to protect our families. These attacks drove fighters into the arms of IS. I spoke to Wissam about this. He told me that he couldn't open a second front against IS now and had to give them some ammunition, otherwise they would attack us. But he was trying to prevent IS from gaining strength by only giving them a few weapons. Later, when we learnt that IS was buying weapons and ammunition from Haftar's people, we stopped altogether."<sup>53</sup>

**During the civil war of 2014–15, groups such as Ansar al-Sharia and IS benefited from alliances with revolutionary groups.**

However, groups such as Ansar al-Sharia and IS not only benefited from alliances with revolutionary groups, but also from the fact that some of the latter became radicalised through conflicts. After the fall of

Gaddafi, Islamist revolutionary leaders in Benghazi and Darna had campaigned among their followers to join state institutions and support political processes such as the 2012 elections. Groups such as Ansar al-Sharia split from the revolutionaries precisely because they rejected that state.<sup>54</sup> With his attack on the revolutionaries, Haftar seemed to vindicate Ansar al-Sharia's uncompromising position: "Ansar told the *Shabab* [young men, fighters]: 'You see? We told you that we have to fight against the state, that we have to conquer it! Now the state is waging war against you!'"<sup>55</sup> Later, after Haftar's allies attacked the revolutionaries' homes, IS tried to attract followers by emphasising that it rejected any compromise with the enemy.<sup>56</sup>

At times, this uncompromising attitude seemed to increase IS's chances of success. In January 2015, for example, a member of the Shura Council expected IS to win the battle for Benghazi, "because they are brutal fighters who will kill anyone who gets in their way. The tribes will submit to them to save the lives of their sons."<sup>57</sup> A politician whose three sons were killed in the fight against Haftar said at the time that many who were now fighting for IS were not Islamists, but had joined it because of the other side's violence.<sup>58</sup> Another person close to the leadership of the Shura Council said at the same time: "If we need IS to defeat Haftar, then let IS come. My family has lost everything, our house was burnt down, thousands of families have fled Benghazi. I have nothing left to lose."<sup>59</sup> According to a former leading member of the Rafallah Sahati Brigade, such radicalisation processes explain why many members of the group first turned to Ansar al-Sharia and later to IS.<sup>60</sup>

Last but not least, there were people whose support or mobilisation for militant Islamists came from opportunism, such as the tendency to join a force that seemed to be on the way to military victory: "When IS suddenly took over almost the entire province of

Nations Panel of Experts on Libya later also accused Jadhra of having had business relations with IS in Sirte. United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Libya Established Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (2011)*, S/2017/466, 1 June 2017, 112, <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=S%2F2017%2F466&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>.

<sup>51</sup> Interview 29 (Ismail Sallabi, former leader of the Rafallah Sahati Brigade and the Benghazi Defence Companies, Istanbul, March 2023).

<sup>52</sup> Interview 28 (see note 48).

<sup>53</sup> Interview 27 (see note 48).

<sup>54</sup> Thurston, *Jihadists* (see note 5); Interviews 27 and 28 (see note 48); Interview 29 (see note 51); Interview 32 (see note 9).

<sup>55</sup> Interview 37 (see note 49); Interview 28 (see note 48).

<sup>56</sup> Interview 28 (see note 48).

<sup>57</sup> Interview 8 (former leader of the Rafallah Sahati Brigade, Tripoli, January 2015).

<sup>58</sup> Interview 9 (politician with close ties to the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council, Tripoli, January 2015).

<sup>59</sup> Interview 11 (person with close family ties to the leadership of the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council, Istanbul, January 2015).

<sup>60</sup> Interview 28 (see note 48).

al-Anbar [in Iraq] in 2014, many in Benghazi were impressed.”<sup>61</sup> Similarly, in Sirte, the triumph of IS in Iraq was a strong argument for members of Ansar al-Sharia to submit to the caliphate.<sup>62</sup> A resident of Darna told of a pharmacist who had sought a licence from IS for his business on his own initiative: “I was surprised and asked him why. He replied: ‘Libya always wanted to be a powerful Arab state. And now look at IS, its territory is bigger than that of Great Britain!’<sup>63</sup> In Darna, there were fighters who “joined every new wave — first IS, later Haftar”.<sup>64</sup> In Benghazi, IS fighters included “people who drank alcohol, consumed drugs or robbed banks and used IS as a cover for their self-enrichment”.<sup>65</sup> In Sirte, where supporters of the Gaddafi regime had been militarily defeated and subjected to persecution by revolutionaries from Misrata, IS offered them an opportunity to obtain weapons, find protection and perhaps even take revenge on Misrata.<sup>66</sup>

### Decline: Tactical logics of action

Similar tactical considerations can be seen in the decline of militant Islamist groups. And here too, such objectives are located on a spectrum that ranges from reactions to an immediate threat to sober cost-benefit calculations.

The fact that former revolutionaries in Sabratha, Darna and Misrata went from initial tolerance towards IS to a costly confrontation with the organisation was directly linked to the threat posed by IS. In Sabratha, the armed groups tolerated IS supporters “until they started kidnapping and killing people”.<sup>67</sup> Confrontation only occurred when the IS offshoot suddenly tried to gain control of the city after a devastating American airstrike in February 2016 — and was subsequently driven out.<sup>68</sup>

In Darna, IS repeatedly clashed with the Abu Salim Brigade as of mid-2014. Together with other organisations, the latter formed the Mujahidin Shura Council of Darna (*Majlis Shura Mujahidi Darna*), which was briefly joined by part of the local Ansar al-Sharia

group before it broke away from the alliance. But open warfare between IS and its opponents only erupted when IS assassinated a prominent Shura Council commander — former LIFG member Nasr al-Okr — and when the Shura Council leader, Salim Derbi, was killed in the ensuing clashes.<sup>69</sup> Fighting in Darna continued for eight months.

External observers usually described this confrontation as an internal conflict between jihadists, namely between IS and groups ideologically affiliated with al-Qaeda.<sup>70</sup> In reality, however, the latter description only applied to part of the hard core of the Abu Salim Brigade. And as for the fight against IS, the Shura Council not only succeeded in mobilising broad support in Darna; it also increasingly tried to shed its jihadist image in public statements. It is difficult to judge whether this also involved genuine ideological change among at least some of the leaders of the Shura Council, as well-informed observers insist.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, the fight against IS in Darna must be seen as the beginning of a process whereby the local revolutionaries distanced themselves from jihadism — even if not *all* of them did so.

The later renaming of the Shura Council as the “Darna Protection Force” (*Quwat Himayat Darna*) followed the same logic. The Protection Force avoided any jihadist references and presented its resistance against Haftar as the city’s collective struggle against dictatorship and support for a “civilian state”.<sup>72</sup> A commander of the Protection Force, who escaped to

69 Interview 32 (see note 9); see also Frederic Wehrey and Ala’ Alrababa’h, “Splitting the Islamists: The Islamic State’s Creeping Advance in Libya,” *Diwan* (blog), 19 June 2015, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/60447>.

70 See, e.g., Rami Musa, “Al-Qaida-linked Militants Attack IS Affiliate in Libya,” *Associated Press*, 10 June 2015; Thomas Joscelyn, “Veteran Jihadists Killed by Islamic State’s ‘Province’ in Derna, Libya,” *Long War Journal* (online), 12 June 2015, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/06/rival-jihadists-battle-derna.php>; Rosenblatt, *All Jihad Is Local* (see note 5); Rhiannon Smith and Jason Pack, “Al-Qaida’s Strategy in Libya: Keep it Local, Stupid,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017): 191–200.

71 Interview 32 (see note 9); Interview 38 (army officer with a leading role in the fight against IS in Darna, Tripoli, December 2023).

72 “Head of the Darna Mujahidin Shura Council announces unification of the city’s security forces into the Darna Protection Force” (Arabic), *Alnabaa TV*, 11 May 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vagnCVr6140>.

61 Interview 28 (see note 48).

62 Collombier, “Sirte’s Tribes” (see note 44).

63 Interview 32 (see note 9).

64 Interview 32 (see note 9).

65 Interview 27 (see note 48).

66 Collombier, “Sirte’s Tribes” (see note 44).

67 Interview 36 (see note 46).

68 Interview 36 (see note 46).

western Libya after the group's defeat, emphasised that the group no longer had any links to jihadists.<sup>73</sup>

Even more drastic and consequential was the change that occurred in Misrata when IS threatened to expand from Sirte towards Misrata. From early 2015 onwards, IS brought Sirte under its control and repeatedly attacked an armed group from Misrata that maintained a presence on Sirte's outskirts.<sup>74</sup> Although this raised awareness of the threat in Misrata, it did not yet trigger mobilisation.<sup>75</sup> Leading players in Misrata also continued to allow their city to be used as a logistical hub by Haftar's opponents in Benghazi — from which IS elements in Benghazi also benefited.<sup>76</sup> This only changed when IS attacked checkpoints between Sirte and Misrata in May 2016, threatening the city itself.

The spontaneous mobilisation of Misratan armed groups prompted a large-scale offensive that would last for months. Hundreds of fighters in the city were killed before IS was defeated in December 2016. As one fighter said at the time: "The day after the attack on the checkpoint in al-Sdada, I joined the offensive. Because IS was closing in, it even appeared in Misrata itself."<sup>77</sup> This was accompanied by a profound shift in attitudes towards militant Islamists in general. Interrogations and documents found in Sirte revealed that IS in Sirte and Benghazi had been able to benefit from the support for Haftar's opponents in Benghazi, which was channelled through Misrata. Social pressure in Misrata then put an end to this support.<sup>78</sup> Political calculations are also likely to have played a role in this development. Misratan politicians had been trying to find new allies in eastern Libya since the formation of a unity government in early 2016.

This required them to end their support for the groups in Benghazi.

The shift in Misrata was an important reason why opponents of Haftar who had been driven out of Benghazi increasingly tried to distance themselves from the jihadists. One example of this was the founding of the Benghazi Defence Companies.<sup>79</sup> The leaders read out the founding declaration in June 2016 in front of the Libyan flag, with an army officer in their midst, and announced that they were following the rulings of the *Dar al-Ifta'*, i.e. the mufti in Tripoli.<sup>80</sup> By doing so, they sought to differentiate themselves from the Shura Council, which Ansar al-Sharia had prevented from using the national flag, as well as from all groups that referred to jihadist legal scholars. They also tried to screen out fighters with links to extremists during the recruitment process — with mixed success, as described above (page 16). After they were accused of such links, they cut ties with dubious figures, which they never tired of emphasising when meeting with the military chain of command in Tripoli and Misrata, with British and American representatives — and with the author.<sup>81</sup>

Individual fighters also sought protection by distancing themselves from militant Islamists. A young man from a western Libyan city who had fought against Haftar in Benghazi told the author: "One of my brothers had joined IS in Syria and was killed there. When I came back from Benghazi, people started asking questions about my ideological tendencies. Later, some distant relatives of mine fought in the ranks of IS in Sabratha. For all these reasons, I sought protection at home and found it in the [anonymised] brigade."<sup>82</sup>

When Haftar attacked Tripoli in 2019, his opponents had learned from this experience. They were now acutely aware of the toxic nature of links with extremists — which the Haftar camp and its foreign allies sought to fabricate from the first day of the war.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Interview 18 (see note 9).

<sup>74</sup> "Dead and injured in IS attack with grenade launchers near Sirte" (Arabic), *al-Arab* (online), 25 March 2015, <https://bit.ly/3wV5yoW>; "Islamic State Militants in Libya 'Seize Sirte Airport'," *BBC News* (online), 29 May 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32935412>.

<sup>75</sup> Interview 12 (politician from Misrata, Istanbul, January 2015); Interview 8 (see note 57).

<sup>76</sup> Interview 13 (politician from Misrata with links to Haftar opponents from Benghazi, Misrata, September 2016); Interview 14 (university professor from Misrata, Misrata, September 2016); Kirkpatrick, Hubbard and Schmitt, "ISIS' Grip on Libyan City" (see note 7).

<sup>77</sup> Interview 15 (Fighters in Misrata's armed groups on the offensive against IS, Misrata, September 2016).

<sup>78</sup> Interviews 13 and 14 (see note 76).

<sup>79</sup> Interview 29 (see note 51); Interview 37 (see note 49).

<sup>80</sup> "Founding Declaration of the Companies for the Defence of Benghazi" (Arabic), *Ean Libya* (online), 2 June 2016, <https://bit.ly/450s2Se>.

<sup>81</sup> Interview 18 (see note 9); Interview 19 (army officer, leading figure in companies for the defence of Benghazi, al-Sdada, November 2018); Interview 29 (see note 51); Interview 37 (see note 49).

<sup>82</sup> Interview 35 (anonymised, September 2023).

<sup>83</sup> See, e.g., "Libyan army identifies wanted terrorists in Tripoli" (Arabic), *Sky News Arabia* (online), 6 April 2019, <https://bit.ly/3yPrrGI>; Isabelle Lasserre, "Jean-Yves Le Drian:



Prominent commanders from Benghazi, accused of such links rightly or wrongly, wanted to join the fight against Haftar in Tripoli. However, both figures from their own circles and western Libyan leaders advised them to stay away so as not to harm the cause.<sup>84</sup> Former foot soldiers of the Shura Council were able to join the forces fighting Haftar, provided they had never been members of Ansar al-Sharia or IS.

In addition, many other young men who had been forcibly displaced from the east of the country by Haftar's forces took up arms. But instead of forming their own unit, which would have attracted negative media attention, they joined various western Libyan groups. Previously, they had found themselves in a precarious situation in western Libya, as displaced young men from the east faced generalised suspicion of being terrorists. They were often held without reason and without trial in the notorious prison of the "Deterrence Apparatus," one of the most powerful militias in Tripoli. By joining western Libyan groups as individual fighters, including the Deterrence Apparatus, they countered such suspicions and found protection.<sup>85</sup>

### Rise: Social embeddedness and social acceptance

Such tactical choices become more understandable through their social context — that is, when considering what was socially acceptable or facilitated by social ties. Before militant Islamists became attractive allies with the escalation of conflicts in 2014, they were able to develop in an environment in which they and their perspectives enjoyed widespread social recognition. This was partly due to the prevailing moral codes under Gaddafi, but above all to the role of Islamists in the 2011 revolution.

It is true that Gaddafi had persecuted and demonised Islamist opponents; at times his regime had arrested young men simply for attending early morning prayers. At the same time, however, Gaddafi had enforced a strict moral code — in the words of a then

young Islamist who had spent several years in the notorious Abu Salim prison: "Libya was a conservative, isolated society. Gaddafi had banned alcohol, prostitution and nightclubs. During Ramadan, everyone fasted. Being religious was entirely normal, and many people who were later labelled as Islamists were simply devout."<sup>86</sup>

Within certain limits, the regime even tolerated a jihadist underground culture in the 2000s. At least for a while, the secret services covertly encouraged the recruitment of young men to fight in Iraq and did not prevent the families of fighters from publicly celebrating them as martyrs when they received news of their deaths.<sup>87</sup> In cities such as Darna, Ajdabiya and Sabratha, networks developed that deeply embedded jihadist ideas in parts of local society. For young men with this social background, jihadism was simply an aspect of piety.<sup>88</sup>

During the 2011 revolution, Islamists actively participated in the struggle, and thereby emerged as prominent leaders. In this way, they accumulated considerable "revolutionary social capital"<sup>89</sup>, which increased their social standing all the more dramatically since they had been in exile, in prison or under surveillance only a short time before. Hardly any of them formed purely Islamist — let alone jihadist — units. Instead, just like others, they mobilised under the banner of the revolution. The revolutionary armed groups were mostly centred on individual cities. Fighters primarily joined groups with whom they had family, friend or neighbourly ties.

The fact that there were more Islamists in some groups — such as those from Darna — than in others was mainly due to local subcultures. But even in these groups, die-hard jihadists fought side by side with young men who were simply committed to the revolution.<sup>90</sup> Deep bonds often developed between Islamist and non-Islamist commanders from different groups during the joint struggle, and these bonds lasted for years. Of course, there was also mistrust — especially between figures who had not fought closely together

'La France est en Libye pour combattre le terrorisme',  
*Le Figaro*, 2 May 2019.

<sup>84</sup> Interview 20 (former leader of Benghazi revolutionary armed groups, Tripoli, June 2019); Interview 22 (former leader of Benghazi revolutionary armed groups, Istanbul, June 2022); Interview 29 (see note 51); Interview 37 (see note 49).

<sup>85</sup> Interviews 20 and 22 (see note 84).

<sup>86</sup> Interview 37 (see note 49).

<sup>87</sup> Interview 24 (journalist from Darna, Istanbul, June 2022); Interview 21 (resident of Sirte, Berlin, November 2019); Collombier, "Sirte's Tribes" (see note 44).

<sup>88</sup> Interview 32 (see note 9); Interview 28 (see note 48).

<sup>89</sup> Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro and Arthur Quesnay, "Le capital social révolutionnaire. L'exemple de la Syrie entre 2011 et 2014," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 211–212, no. 1–2 (2016): 24–35.

<sup>90</sup> Fitzgerald, "Finding Their Place" (see note 2).

and only encountered each other when the first rivalries emerged after the fall of the regime.<sup>91</sup>

Three aspects were decisive for the ascent of militant Islamist movements after 2011. Firstly, the revolution gave rise to many charismatic leaders of armed groups who used an Islamic idiom. It was often difficult to determine which of them were Islamists, jihadists or simply devout — the boundaries were blurred.

Secondly, in the years after 2011, politicians and commanders who were part of the militant Islamist spectrum were able to build on the solidarity of those with whom they had fought during the revolution. At least in the initial phase, they enjoyed high social standing, which showed in the election results in 2012 and subsequently dwindled as conflict and insecurity spread.

Thirdly, groups led by figures who ranged from pious to jihadist after the fall of Gaddafi often included both Islamists and non-Islamists. Most, though not all, of the leaders of the Abu Salim Brigade in Darna were jihadists, but among their fighters were “many ordinary young people from Darna who smoked and put gel in their hair”.<sup>92</sup> The founders of the Rafallah Sahati Brigade in Benghazi “espoused Islamist ideas. Most of us were former prisoners. But many of our members were *Shabab* who smoked, took drugs and listened to music. We were open to everyone. It was similar with other groups, such as the 17 February Brigade or the Martyrs of Zintan Brigade.”<sup>93</sup> Leading figures in Zawiya and Sabratha such as Mohamed al-Kilani, Omar al-Mukhtar and Shaaban Hadiya were widely perceived as Islamists — but in fact “Hadiya was a charismatic legal scholar who had been a unifying figure in 2011, not an extremist”.<sup>94</sup> Kilani and Mukhtar were “not members of any ideological organisations. Omar al-Mukhtar had been Abu Salim in prison, but he was simply deeply religious. And many fighters were not — they smoked and so on.”<sup>95</sup> The leaders of the Faruq Brigade in Zawiya, who were later vilified as terrorists by political opponents, were religious — “but among the members

there were more people who drank alcohol than strict believers”.<sup>96</sup>

These aspects explain why many revolutionaries did not see those militant Islamists with whom they had personal connections as a threat. And for the same reasons, Islamist ideology was not so alien to many of them. For young men in the Abu Salim brigade from Darna, for example, chants (*nasha'id*) from the al-Qaeda movement were commonplace.<sup>97</sup> The same applied to the black flag with the Islamic *Shahada*, which was used by IS and al-Qaeda groups, among others. In Benghazi, “we had to explain to the *Shabab* how this was perceived internationally”.<sup>98</sup> Looking back, an Islamist revolutionary from the city said: “I can understand why many people liked the black flag. But it didn’t make a good impression, it looked like IS.”<sup>99</sup>

### Militant Islamist groups in Libya were able to operate openly in society.

This background also helps to contextualise why jihadists were able to continue operating openly in society when they separated themselves from the revolutionaries and formed their own groups — in other words, why they emerged as a social movement and were not forced underground as isolated cells. In Benghazi, many initially regarded Ansar al-Sharia as a group of devout young men interested in the common good.<sup>100</sup> As recently as 2013, a member of the local council was of the opinion that “all they want is Sharia law”<sup>101</sup> — and after all, the fundamental role of Sharia enjoyed support across political divides in the first few years post 2011.<sup>102</sup> Even when the leaders of Ansar al-Sharia openly rejected the state and democratic processes, their former brothers-in-arms advocated resolving such differences of opinion through dialogue.<sup>103</sup>

91 Peter Cole/Umar Khan, “The Fall of Tripoli: Part 1,” in *The Libyan Revolution*, ed. Cole and McQuinn (see note 2), 55–79.

92 Interview 32 (see note 9); Interview 6 (journalist from Darna, Berlin, November 2014).

93 Interview 28 (see note 48).

94 Interview 34 (former leader of revolutionary armed groups, Zawiya, June 2023).

95 Interview 36 (see note 46).

96 Interview 25 (former leader in al-Faruq Brigade, Tripoli, November 2022).

97 Interview 32 (see note 9).

98 Interview 37 (see note 49).

99 Interview 28 (see note 48).

100 Interview 2 (Member of the Benghazi Local Council, Benghazi, March 2013); Interview 37 (see note 49); Fitzgerald, “Jihadism and Its Relationship” (see note 6).

101 Interview 2 (see note 100).

102 Fitzgerald, “What Happened?” (see note 10).

103 Interview 5 (members of the Misrata Municipal Council, Misrata, October 2014); Interview 10 (former LIFG leader, Tripoli, January 2015); Interview 27 (see note 48); Mary Fitz-



Last but not least, this explains the permeability between revolutionaries and jihadists and the fact that social ties facilitated alliances between them. It was all the easier for members of the Rafallah Sahati Brigade to join Ansar al-Sharia because they were reuniting with their former comrades-in-arms. IS also initially appeared in the guise of fighters with whom the revolutionaries previously had personal relationships — such as a person who was sent to Benghazi by IS in Iraq in 2013 to demand that three revolutionary commanders submit to the organisation, albeit in vain.<sup>104</sup> In Sabratha, a leading revolutionary acted as an intermediary with IS when negotiating the release of hostages, using relationships dating back to the joint fight in 2011: “Abdallah Haftar [the local IS leader] had been with us in the mountains in 2011. He was a brave fighter — a simple person, not ideological, interested in money. He also fought in our ranks in 2014.”<sup>105</sup>

Social ties and embeddedness in local society therefore played an important role in the spread of militant Islamists in former revolutionary strongholds such as Benghazi and Darna. The later IS capital of Sirte, on the other hand, was anything but a revolutionary stronghold; there, another logic applied. Ansar al-Sharia and later IS established themselves in the city as small, isolated minorities that benefited from the absence of a military counterweight. Sirte had experienced the revolution as a defeat, the revolutionaries did not have a broad social base there, and the city’s elite was in prison, in exile or dead.<sup>106</sup>

Among the founders of Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte were members of the Faruq Brigade from Misrata — a revolutionary group that included both Islamists and non-Islamists in its ranks. The Faruq Brigade split in two when part of it settled in Sirte and merged into Ansar al-Sharia. This split involved the Sirte group’s geographical and social distancing from its former brothers-in-arms, even if relations between some members of both groups continued.<sup>107</sup> Ansar al-Sharia in turn later formed the nucleus of IS in the city. Therefore, the rise of IS in Sirte differs from the pattern in other

Libyan cities with regards to the social embeddedness of its jihadists.

## Decline: social disassociation and isolation

Can the role that social relations played also contribute to understanding the decline of militant Islamists?

On the one hand, social solidarity often seems to have slowed down processes of disassociation from jihadists or those who had contact with them. This was evident, for example, in the attempts at dialogue with Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi or in the leniency shown to some of their comrades-in-arms in the fight against IS in Darna. Although they rejected democracy and offered refuge to the Egyptian jihadist Omar Rifai Surur, it was thought that “such differences of opinion should be resolved through discussion, not war”.<sup>108</sup> Or in relationships with old friends such as a former Ansar al-Sharia cadre, about whom American military officers had asked the leader of the Benghazi Defence Companies, Ismail Sallabi: “I told them: ‘Yes, it’s true, Younes and I were old friends, even before 2011. When he joined Ansar al-Sharia, we became estranged. After that, I only helped him with one very specific matter, and he was never in the Companies.’”<sup>109</sup>

Sallabi and another leader of the Companies, Ziyad Balam, showed a certain leniency towards figures whose relationships with terrorists made them jihadists themselves in the eyes of foreign intelligence services, even if these relationships were purely transactional in nature. For example, Balam said of Saadi Nofili, who had appeared in a video with the Algerian terrorist Mokhtar Belmokhtar: “I asked Saadi about it. He explained to me that he had helped some people to get from Benghazi to Zalla in return for money, and only then did he find out who they were. I assured myself that Saadi was not an extremist and that it was purely a business relationship. Nevertheless, the accusations were a liability for us and I asked him to voluntarily submit to a police investigation.”<sup>110</sup> And Sallabi commented on the involvement of another shady figure in the battalions’ military operations: “Ahmed al-Hasnawi is a simple man. He is not ‘al-Qaeda’. But that’s the way it is in the south, where

gerald, “‘Changed Utterly’: How the 2014–18 War Transformed Benghazi’s Social Fabric,” in *Violence and Social Transformation in Libya*, ed. Virginie Collombier and Wolfram Lacher (London: Hurst Publishers, 2023), 97–131.

**104** Interview 28 (see note 48).

**105** Interview 36 (see note 46).

**106** Collombier, “Sirte’s Tribes” (see note 44).

**107** Interview 14 (see note 76).

**108** Interview 38 (see note 71).

**109** Interview 29 (see note 51).

**110** Interview 37 (see note 49).

you do business with everyone — with IS, al-Qaeda or whoever.”<sup>111</sup>

On the other hand, once militant Islamists experienced social ostracism, it was difficult to reverse. This makes it easier to understand why Haftar’s opponents did not enter into a new tactical alliance with militant Islamists in 2019, but instead kept their distance from all those who were — rightly or wrongly — categorised as such. A former LIFG leader attributed this to the experiences made in the fight against IS in Darna, Sabratha and Sirte: “Since then, the *thuwwar* [revolutionaries] knew that they could not trust jihadists.”<sup>112</sup>

The repudiating effect of the brutality committed by IS also played an important role in this development. IS not only became an immediate threat; its ostentatious cruelty broke all boundaries of social acceptability. The aforementioned fighter from Misrata, who joined the offensive against IS, also explained his mobilisation by saying that IS “dragged the image of Islam into the mud”.<sup>113</sup> It is a common pattern for rebel groups or terrorist organisations to alienate supporters and sympathisers by using violence against civilians.<sup>114</sup>

The stigma associated with the Islamist label since 2014 also contributed to the isolation of not only militant but also more moderate Islamists. Another former LIFG leader recalled: “Suddenly, people no longer wanted anything to do with us, they never wanted to have known us. They lumped us all together — ‘the Islamists’. The demonisation by channels like *al-Asema* TV was very effective. They talked about the LIFG as if we were responsible for everything, as if we were behind everything.”<sup>115</sup>

A cadre in the Libyan branch of the Muslim Brotherhood explained why the organisation changed its name in 2021 in an attempt to distance itself from the Muslim Brotherhood: “The Muslim Brotherhood no longer finds any acceptance. No one will come to your office. If I speak in the name of the Muslim Brotherhood, I am evil incarnate.”<sup>116</sup> His name had appeared on a list of “terrorists” published by the

parliament in eastern Libya, which was aligned with Haftar — with noticeable consequences in his social and professional environment, where some now treated him with suspicion. And an activist from Darna, who tried to raise public awareness for prisoners from his hometown who were arbitrarily detained and tortured in Haftar’s prisons, said: “Nobody wants to talk about the prisoners because they are considered ‘Daesh’ (IS). If you talk about them, you are ‘Daesh’ yourself”.<sup>117</sup>

Many of the activists, politicians and leaders of armed groups who saw themselves stigmatised in this way withdrew and became increasingly socially isolated — regardless of whether they remained in Libya or went into exile. This was the case, for example, with the former LIFG leaders in Istanbul.<sup>118</sup> The former leader of the Benghazi Defence Companies, Ismail Sallabi, reported that he only met with a few old friends in his Istanbul exile and no longer agreed to meet with journalists. When Haftar attacked Tripoli, he wanted to fight — but he was told to stay away; his involvement would only do harm, since he was defamed as an extremist.<sup>119</sup>

Another reason why tactical considerations did not lead to the expected comeback of militant Islamists in 2019, therefore, was because the latter had lost much of their social acceptance in the meantime and were now socially isolated. Many of the trust relationships that militant Islamists had forged with their brothers-in-arms through the joint fight in 2011 had long since been shattered by 2019. The crucial experience of the confrontation with IS and the media’s demonisation of all Islamists played a significant role in this. However, the social networks that militant Islamists had been embedded in are likely to have impeded this evolution rather than facilitated it. The fact that the tide turned so quickly and completely therefore requires further explanation.

## Rise and fall: conformism and demarcation

Another key to understanding the dynamics since 2011 is provided by social mechanisms of demarca-

111 Interview 29 (see note 51).

112 Interview 30 (former LIFG leader, Istanbul, March 2023).

113 Interview 15 (see note 77).

114 Klaus Schlichte, *In the Shadow of Violence: The Politics of Armed Groups* (Frankfurt, 2009); Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends* (see note 31); Hwang, *Why Terrorists Quit* (see note 31).

115 Interview 23 (former LIFG leader, Istanbul, June 2022).

116 Interview 33 (Muslim Brotherhood leaders, Istanbul, March 2023).

117 Interview 24 (see note 87).

118 Interview 17 (former LIFG leader, Istanbul, November 2017); Interview 30 (see note 112); Interview 31 (former LIFG leader, Istanbul, March 2023).

119 Interview 29 (see note 51).

tion and conformism, of distinction and adaptation. The driving force behind these mechanisms is an individual's search for social recognition and group affiliation. For Georg Simmel and Pierre Bourdieu, distinction and emulation express social status or its aspiration; the dialectical relationship between both is the driver behind fashion and taste.<sup>120</sup> Similar processes can be observed in the rise and decline of militant Islamist movements in Libya.

As discussed above (page 20ff), Libya's militant Islamist movements in the first few years after 2011 formed part of a societal mainstream that followed a politically revolutionary but socially conservative zeitgeist. Initially, militant Islamists and jihadists did not stand out from the mass of revolutionaries either by appearance or discourse. The aesthetics of the revolutionaries – bearded, often in camouflage clothing – could hardly be distinguished from those of militant Islamists. Many militiamen adopted this aesthetic. A former LIFG leader recalled: “Back then, even hashish-smoking militia leaders grew a beard and had themselves called *Sheikh*. We misinterpreted this phenomenon, because we had been isolated from Libyan society for so long; suddenly everyone seemed to share our beliefs.”<sup>121</sup> A revolutionary from the Islamist spectrum took a similar view: “Take Ismail Sallabi or Wissam ben Hamid, for example. In 2012, Ismail wore the abaya [long robe] of the Islamists because it was popular back then. Today he offers you cigarettes when you meet him”<sup>122</sup> (an observation that the author can confirm). Along with aesthetic emulation came formulaic commitments to the ideals of the revolution and a widespread tendency to conceal or reinterpret one's own role in the Gaddafi era to better suit with zeitgeist.

The fact that the aesthetics and habitus of the revolutionaries and Islamists found so many imitators was not least due to their status as victors and heroes. As one leader of the Rafallah Sahati Brigade said: “In October 2011, we came back from the front as heroes, as revolutionaries. When the killing spree began, people suddenly started calling us terrorists

and militias. We were shocked – only a year before we had been noble revolutionaries!”<sup>123</sup>

### Youthful boasting and aspirations for heroism were driving forces behind the gradual separation of jihadist splinter groups.

Aspirations for heroism were also a driving force behind the gradual separation of jihadist splinter groups after the fall of the regime. For example, many young men from Darna went to Syria because “those who had fought against the Americans in Iraq or against Gaddafi in 2011 had come back as heroes. If you wanted to be a hero, you could join the jihad.”<sup>124</sup> A commander from Benghazi recalled a sixteen-year-old who came from western Libya to fight against Haftar: “Someone like him also went to Benghazi so he could later brag at home that he had fought there. Fortunately, he joined us and not some extremist group.”<sup>125</sup> According to a Rafallah Sahati veteran, the popularity of IS in Benghazi was also due (among other things) to adolescent boasting: “There was a lot of Hollywood involved with IS, it was all about action – ‘I did this, I did that’. They were by no means all ideologues.”<sup>126</sup> However, ideology was also a means of distinguishing oneself as superior. Groups such as Ansar al-Sharia and later IS saw themselves as representatives of the only true doctrine; for them, followers of more moderate movements were apostates or infidels.<sup>127</sup>

Characteristic of the emerging jihadist splinter groups was the age of their members, who were mainly teenagers and young adults.<sup>128</sup> Leaders of the revolutionary brigades often emphasised that a generational gap separated them from the members of Ansar al-Sharia and IS: “There were only very young people in IS. None of the older revolutionaries joined it.”<sup>129</sup> In addition to youthful boasting and the pursuit of fame, other general youth phenomena were also recognisable, namely rebellion against parents and

**120** Georg Simmel, “Philosophie der Mode,” *Moderne Zeitfragen*, no. 11 (1905): 5–41; Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979).

**121** Interview 23 (see note 115).

**122** Interview 36 (see note 46).

**123** Interview 28 (see note 48).

**124** Interview 32 (see note 9).

**125** Interview 37 (see note 49).

**126** Interview 28 (see note 48).

**127** Interview 32 (see note 9); Interviews 27 and 28 (see note 48).

**128** See also Thurston, *Jihadists* (see note 5), p. 250; Rosenblatt, *All Jihad Is Local* (see note 5), 16.

**129** Interview 29 (see note 51); see also Interview 28 (see note 48).

society as well as the search for identity, belonging and a higher purpose.<sup>130</sup> Such dynamics have also been observed in other contexts, for example among young Salafists in Tunisia or socially marginalised teenagers in Europe who were attracted to a jihadist subculture, a “jihadi cool”.<sup>131</sup> What has gone largely unnoticed so far is how fast-moving such a subculture can be — just like other youth cultures.

With the reversal around 2016, the aesthetics and habitus of militant Islamists quickly disappeared. Some who had worn the “abaya of the Islamists” in 2012 now wore the “abaya of the Madkhali Salafists,” whose movement experienced a surge.<sup>132</sup> Among the leaders of armed groups, beards became shorter or were shaved off completely; militia leaders such as Haitham al-Tajuri from Tripoli now wore designer clothes and embodied an ostentatious materialism that replaced Islamist revolutionary rhetoric. The militiamen’s new youth culture glorified quick riches through violence and crime.<sup>133</sup> Later, the leaders of armed groups donned uniforms to emphasise the formal and disciplined nature of their units.<sup>134</sup>

In late 2023, the author met with a *sheikh* and university professor who, as well-informed fellow citizens alleged, had helped recruit fighters for the jihad in Iraq before 2011. He had led an armed group in 2011, some of whose members later joined Ansar al-Sharia and then IS in Sirte. But now he met the

author in a suit and was clean-shaven, and he emphasised that he was a pure academic and had had nothing to do with armed groups since the fall of Gaddafi.<sup>135</sup>

Libya is not the only case where militant Islamists appeared and disappeared again as if it was a fashion movement. In the Lebanese port city of Tripoli, which became notorious for its jihadist subculture, older citizens can still remember the approximate date when the young people of a particular neighbourhood “suddenly became ‘Islamists’ — it was in the summer of 1980...[They] began to regularly perform their five prayers a day, grow beards ... [and] ostensibly hold up the black banners of jihad.”<sup>136</sup> And in Tunisia, from where thousands of young men had joined jihadist groups in Libya and Syria after 2011, jihadism was already “out of fashion” by 2020.<sup>137</sup>

Mechanisms of demarcation and emulation can help to understand both the rapid spread and the equally rapid decline of militant Islamist movements in Libya. The impetus came from key events such as the 2011 revolution and the fight against IS, but also from the shaping of public opinion by the media. Processes of social realignment and the weight of conformism help to explain how quickly such impulses can cause societal trends to emerge and to disappear again. Or, to use the vocabulary of social movement theories: how discursive frames resonate at a certain point in time — and no longer do so only a little later.<sup>138</sup>

<sup>130</sup> Fitzgerald, “Jihadism and Its Relationship” (see note 6).

<sup>131</sup> Monica Marks, “Youth Politics and Tunisian Salafism: Understanding the Jihadi Current,” *Mediterranean Politics* 18, no. 1 (2013): 107–14; Claudia Dantschke, *Pop-Jihad. History and Structure of Salafism and Jihadism in Germany* (Berlin: Institute for the Study of Radical Movements [ISRM], 2013); Daniela Pisoitu, “Subcultural Theory Applied to Jihadi and Right-Wing Radicalisation in Germany,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 1 (2015): 9–28; Sune Qvortrup Jensen, Jeppe Fuglsang Larsen and Sveinung Sandberg, “Rap, Islam and Jihadi Cool: The Attractions of the Western Jihadi Subculture,” *Crime, Media, Culture* 18, no. 3 (2022): 430–45.

<sup>132</sup> Interview 36 (see note 46). On the rise of the Madkhali-Salafists in Libya, see ICG, *Addressing the Rise of Libya’s Madkhali-Salafis* (Brussels, April 2019) <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/200-libyas-madkhali-salafis.pdf>.

<sup>133</sup> Emadeddin Badi, “No Country for the Young: The Degeneration of a Libyan Generation,” in *Violence and Social Transformation in Libya*, ed. Collombier and Lacher (see note 103), 19–45.

<sup>134</sup> Wolfram Lacher, *Libya’s Militias Have Become the State. Dimensions and consequences of a consolidation process*, SWP Comment 44/2023 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2023), doi: 10.18449/2023C44.

<sup>135</sup> Interview 39 (anonymised, December 2023).

<sup>136</sup> Lefèvre, *Jihad in the City* (see note 20), 128–29.

<sup>137</sup> ICG, *Jihadisme en Tunisie* (see note 21), 9.

<sup>138</sup> Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 611–39.

# Conclusions

The meteoric rise and abrupt fall of militant Islamist movements in Libya cannot be explained solely by tactical logics and even less by the power of ideological mobilisation. The search for protection, for example, could cause actors to either ally with jihadists or to distance themselves from them. Certainly, it was important whether militant Islamists had access to resources or were denied them, whether they celebrated military victories or suffered defeats. But the fact that they were able to spread at all becomes comprehensible by their social embeddedness. The fact that they were no longer seen as tactical allies at a later point in time was not only due to tactical calculations, but also to the fact that ties of solidarity dating back to 2011 had been shattered by traumatic experiences.

The speed of both the expansion and decline of militant Islamist movements becomes easier to understand when mechanisms of demarcation and conformity are considered. Actors searching for recognition and belonging had impulses that were triggered by key events and became self-reinforcing through the weight of conformism. And thus Libya's militant Islamists were suddenly gone again.

For analytical purposes, this study has separated mechanisms that are often difficult to distinguish in reality. How is it possible to determine in individual cases whether someone puts on the "Islamists' abaya" based on deliberate calculation or out of a desire to conform? In any case, accounts of those involved and close observers suggest that both happened. It should also have become clear that tactical considerations, social relationships and the dialectic of demarcation and conformity interacted with each other.

None of this is to say that ideology plays no role in militant Islamist mobilisation. It undoubtedly does for the hard core and long-term militants. Ideology can contribute significantly to the longevity and resilience of social movements or rebel groups – regardless of whether they espouse Islamist or other ideas. Although this study cannot conclusively explain why it did not do so in this case, a hypothesis does emerge from the approach chosen here: follow-

ers who join a group for tactical reasons, social solidarity or conformism can internalise its ideology.<sup>139</sup> However, this requires, among other things, time – in other words, the lines of conflict and balance of power that condition militant Islamist mobilisation must retain a modicum of constancy over a certain period of time. If a conflict reaches a dramatic turning point after a short period of time, thereby fundamentally changing the positions and calculations of its actors, this can interrupt and reverse processes of ideological internalisation. Followers who adopted ideological positions due to conformism or opportunism can easily change them again under such circumstances. This, in any case, is what occurred in Libya.

Nor does it follow that the decline of militant Islamists in Libya will be permanent. On the contrary, the analysis here would suggest that it is certainly reversible. On the one hand, there is still a hard core of long-standing Islamist – but not jihadist – activists and ideologues who are closely networked with each other, such as the Mufti and the former LIFG leadership. They are waiting for political conditions to shift in their favour.<sup>140</sup> On the other hand, hundreds, perhaps thousands of former members of Ansar al-Sharia and IS are being held in Libyan prisons under the most appalling conditions – and the long-term consequences of this are unpredictable. Both the Libyan and other cases prove that prisons can offer the space and place for long-term radicalisation.<sup>141</sup>

Above all, however, the fate of militant Islamists in Libya shows that critical junctures can have unpredictable consequences by suddenly revolutionising generally accepted assumptions about what political

<sup>139</sup> Maynard, "Ideology and Armed Conflict" (see note 15).

<sup>140</sup> Interview 26 (Mufti al-Sadeq al-Gharyani, Tripoli, November 2022); Interview 23 (see note 115).

<sup>141</sup> For example, Aaron Y. Zelin argues that Tunisia's Ansar al-Sharia originated from the experiences of prison inmates during the Ben Ali era and that "the future of Tunisian jihadism is now brewing in the country's prisons". Zelin, *Your Sons* (see note 45), 266.



stance is socially acceptable.<sup>142</sup> The war in the Gaza Strip, which began in October 2023, is the most recent example of this. Even if it is not ultimately a key event in Libya, it has suddenly changed the way many Libyans view Hamas: “Today, every Libyan will tell you that they hope Hamas will win. But just three months ago, Hamas was still the evil Muslim Brotherhood.”<sup>143</sup>

While this study problematizes common assumptions about the drivers of militant Islamist mobilisation, it does not attempt to replace them with a supposedly more plausible model. Fashion trends are notoriously difficult to predict.<sup>144</sup> To be more precise: Non-linear developments driven by the adaptation of many to the sudden repositioning of a few actors are largely unpredictable. This realisation does not make it any easier to develop recommendations on how to deal with militant Islamists. Three conclusions, which may also be relevant for other cases, nevertheless emerge from the present analysis.

Firstly, the Libyan case illustrates that extreme caution is required with regard to labels such as “Islamists” and “jihadists” – not to mention “terrorists”. This applies in particular to contexts in which dense social networks play just as big a role in militant mobilisation as ideological proximity. Maintaining close relationships with militant Islamists in such circumstances does not mean being one yourself. This is all the truer in societies whose austere values are sometimes difficult for outsiders to distinguish from explicitly militant ideologies. In retrospect, it becomes clear that most international coverage of militant Islamists in Libya during the period analysed here painted too crude a picture. As a result, individuals and groups often ended up being put into pigeon-holes to which they did not belong on closer inspection.

Secondly, this study shows that even those who not only make pacts with jihadist groups, but also join them, are by no means all ideologically con-

vinced Islamists. This is not a surprising finding in itself, but merely confirms what studies have already established in many other contexts. However, the Libyan case shows that the motives for militant Islamist mobilisation can be even more diverse than previously assumed. In addition to tactical, even opportunistic actions and reactions to grievances such as arbitrary repression, these include close social ties and the pursuit of social recognition and belonging.

Thirdly and finally, these conclusions do not only apply to militant Islamists. Rather, they indicate that militant Islamists follow the same logics of action as other armed actors. Analyses of armed groups have so far paid surprisingly little attention to the search for social recognition as a motivating factor – compared to supposedly rational interests such as power, self-enrichment or survival. Social demarcation and conformism are mechanisms at work in all group formation processes. They also matter in overall societal shifts through which political ideals and cleavages gain or lose resonance. They should be given greater consideration in order to better understand the diverse motivations behind militant mobilisation – whether Islamist or not.

## Abbreviations

HSFK	Hessische Stiftung Friedens- und Konfliktforschung (Frankfurt)
ICG	International Crisis Group (Brussels)
Ifri	Institut français des relations internationales (Paris)
IS	Islamic State
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
ISRM	Institute for the Study of Radical Movements (Berlin)
JCP	Justice and Construction Party
LIFG	Libyan Islamic Fighting Group
MSTB	Majlis Shura Thuwwar Benghazi (Shura Council of the Revolutionaries of Benghazi)
PRIF	Peace Research Institute Frankfurt
TWQ	Third World Quarterly

<sup>142</sup> Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen, “The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism,” *World Politics* 59, no. 3 (2007): 341–69; Ivan Ermakoff, “The Structure of Contingency,” *American Journal of Sociology* 121, no. 1 (2015): 64–125.

<sup>143</sup> Interview 38 (see note 71).

<sup>144</sup> Priscille Biehlmann, “‘You’ve Got to Be Data-driven’: The Fashion Forecasters Using AI to Predict the Next Trend,” *The Guardian* (online), 1 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/oct/01/ai-artificial-intelligence-fashion-trend-forecasting-style>.

