



Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism: Libya case study

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International Centre for
Counter-Terrorism - The Hague



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This report is part of a wider project, led by the International Centre for Counter- Terrorism (ICCT) – the Hague, and funded by the EU Devco on “Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism”. This project aims to produce evidence-based guidance and capacity building outputs based on original, context-sensitive research into the risks and opportunities in media reporting of terrorism and terrorist incidents. The role of media reporting on terrorism has been under investigated and is an underutilised dimension of a holistic counter-terrorism strategy. How the media reports on terrorism has the potential to impact counter-terrorism (CT) perspective positively or negatively.



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Key Findings

- Libya's civil conflict is underpinned by an intense battle of narratives. A majority of domestic outlets are linked in some way to political or armed factions, with many owned or funded by actors in the civil conflict that began in 2014. This has led to the weaponisation of media, with disinformation emerging as a particular problem.
- Key to this has been the strategy adopted by pro-Haftar media of branding opponents and critics as "terrorists" or "terrorist sympathisers" which has led to the targeting of a wide range of individuals, including journalists.¹ While anti-Haftar factions have, more recently, attempted to co-opt such rhetoric, it remains a far more potent weapon for Haftar's camp.
- The casual use of the terms "terrorist" or "terrorist sympathiser" has become so widespread in Libyan media that the word "terrorism" has lost meaning in the Libyan context. This has undermined attempts to conduct in-depth reporting on designated terrorist groups present in Libya, including Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda linked groups.
- Libyan media outlets often recycle material from terrorist groups' propaganda, particularly social media, with little fact-checking or verification, thus unwittingly amplifying their messaging.
- Professionalising Libya's media sector will take years and little progress can be made while the civil conflict continues. In the meantime, measures to protect journalists and tackle hate speech and incitement should be encouraged.

¹ Associated Press, "East Libya military court sentences journalist to 15 years," AP News, 31 July 2020. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/journalists-libya-middle-east-africa-khalifa-hifter-c7118247b9c3b479acdc2e1a7c53817d>, accessed: 19 October 2020.

Introduction

This case study seeks to examine the impact – positive and negative – of media reporting of terrorism in Libya since 2011.

Libya has struggled to develop a professionalised media sector following the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011. This is partly due to a host of legacy issues related to the way media was controlled and consumed in Libya during the forty-two years Gaddafi was in power.² But it is also due to the fact that the evolution of Libya's media landscape in the post-Gaddafi period has been beholden to the country's power struggles.³ A majority of domestic outlets are linked in some way to a political or armed faction, with a significant number owned or funded by actors in the civil conflict that began with Khalifa Haftar's then unauthorised military operations in May 2014, and has continued in different iterations since.⁴ This has led to the weaponisation of media, with the dissemination of disinformation becoming a particular problem.⁵ Domestic journalism that is independent from the warring factions or an external power is virtually non-existent. Individual reporters have little autonomy apart from what they post on personal social media accounts.

This research paper shows that Libyan media outlets – particularly television channels, by far the most popular and influential medium⁶ – have played a significant role in the civil conflict since 2014. By taking partisan positions and adopting specific – and highly simplistic – narratives to describe complex security dynamics, they have influenced public perceptions of actors and driven the polarisation of public opinion.

Key to this has been the strategy adopted by pro-Haftar figures and allied media of branding all opponents and critics “terrorists” or “terrorist sympathisers.”⁷ While anti-Haftar factions have, more recently, attempted to co-opt such rhetoric and use it against their foes, it remains a far more potent weapon for Haftar's camp, which has claimed to be fighting terrorism since May 2014. Not only has this “counter-terrorism” narrative been key to

Haftar's efforts to build a domestic support base, it has also helped him gain foreign backing, particularly from countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt, whose own state media outlets also conflate a range of actors – particularly Islamist – under the “terrorist” label.

The casual use of the terms “terrorist” or “terrorist sympathiser” has become so widespread in Libyan media outlets that the word “terrorism” has lost meaning. Given the blurred lines between more traditional media outlets and social media, this effect is also evident in wider public discourse. This, in turn, has undermined efforts to conduct in-depth and more revelatory reporting on designated terrorist groups which could contribute to better understanding about how radicalisation occurs within the Libyan context and how it can be countered. It has also increased risks for journalists who attempt more nuanced reporting.

The weaponisation of Libyan media outlets, which have been transformed into propaganda tools for warring groups, has led to the perception that such outlets – and the individual reporters that work for them – are merely another arm of political and military factions. As a result, journalists are seen as integral to the conflict, whether through bolstering or challenging a narrative, the latter often leading to their targeting by belligerents. This targeting takes several forms: some foreign journalists have been smeared through orchestrated social media campaigns or denounced on partisan television channels as “terrorist sympathisers” or spies while Libyan journalists accused of the same have been detained by armed groups. The most serious case concerned Ismail Abuzreiba al-Zway, a photojournalist seized by Khalifa Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF)⁸ in 2018. Two years later he was sentenced to fifteen years “on vague terrorism charges” by a military court.⁹ The trial was widely criticised by the United Nations (UN) mission to Libya and both Libyan and international journalist advocacy organisations.

This report is based primarily on media monitoring in

2 Altai Consulting, “Libya Media Assessment,” prepared for the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, May 2013. Available at: <http://www.altaiconsulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Altai-Consulting-Libyan-Media-One-Year-Later.pdf>, accessed: 04 December 2020.

3 Rami Musa, “Media Landscapes: Libya,” European Journalism Centre, 2018. Available at: <https://medialandscapes.org/country/libya>, accessed: 09 December 2020.

4 Mokhtar Elareshi, “Media and Social Change in Libya,” in Nouredine Miladi and Noha Mellor, eds., *Routledge Handbook on Arab Media*, (London: Routledge, 2020)

5 Ahmed Gatnash and Nadine Dahan, “In Libya, traditional and social media are used to fuel war,” *Arab Tyrant Manual*, 14 April 2019. Available at <https://arabtyrantmanual.com/in-libya-traditional-and-social-media-are-used-to-fuel-war/>, accessed: 20 October 2020.

6 A survey conducted by BBC Media Action published in 2015 provided some insights into how Libyan consume media. It found that ninety-nine percent have a satellite television in their home and seventy-six percent watch TV every day. More than seventy percent of respondents cited television as their main source of information. Libyan channels were the most popular, particularly the state broadcaster al-Wataniya. In contrast, just four percent said radio was their main source of information. According to the survey, thirty-two percent said they use the internet regularly, a figure now significantly outdated given increased internet penetration in Libya since 2015. Ten percent said they use international websites as a main source of information and 26 percent said they had a Facebook account, a figure that has increased significantly since. According to Facebook's own audience research, an estimated 4 million Libyans use Facebook out of a population of 6.5 million. See: Najla Dowson-Zeidan, Tim Eaton and Karen Wespieser, “After the revolution – what do Libyans and Tunisians believe about their media?” *BBC Media Action*, March 2015. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/reports/after-the-revolution>, accessed: October 20, 2020.

7 As International Crisis Group observed regarding the labelling of opponents: “Haftar's banding together of all of his opponents under the ISIS label was both inaccurate and deeply divisive, worsening local fractures...and driving groups that could be amenable to a negotiated peace toward extremes.” This tactic reached its peak in June 2017 when Haftar's political allies in the House of Representatives published a list of 75 Libyans – including elected representatives and senior officials in state institutions – they accused of being involved in terrorism. The list was published in full in several Libyan media outlets. See: International Crisis Group, “How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb,” ICG, 24 July 2017. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/178-how-islamic-state-rose-fell-and-could-rise-again-maghreb>, accessed: 08 December 2020.

8 The Libyan Arab Armed Forces is the name Khalifa Haftar has given his forces and is used throughout this paper instead of the imprecise “Libyan National Army” which does not reflect the fact there are rival groups that claim to be Libya's national army, including those aligned with the internationally recognised Government of National Accord, which Haftar opposes.

9 The Associated Press report on the sentencing noted that “rights watchdogs say [Haftar's] war on “terrorism” is indiscriminate, failing to distinguish between extremist militants and ordinary critics, and that his forces regularly use arrest, abduction and torture to try to exert control.” The Associated Press also reported that al-Zway's friend and colleague Reda Fhelboom, a prominent Libyan journalist who had previously been abducted by a militia in Tripoli over his own reporting, rejected the charges against al-Zway as absurd, saying: “He may have different opinions from Hifter and his allies, and yes, he was active in civil society groups, but does that make him a terrorist?” See: Associated Press, 31 July 2020.

Libya, plus in-depth interviews with media owners, practitioners and trainers – both Libyan and non-Libyan – who have worked in the country since 2011. Fieldwork was conducted in western Libya in November 2019 and further interviews were conducted in Tunisia and Turkey or remotely. The author reviewed a range of public materials, including relevant Libyan legislation, reports by non-governmental organisations and postings on Facebook and other internet and social media sites. The author also drew on her own on the ground observations of how the media landscape in Libya has evolved since 2011.

The Context

Libya's media landscape pre-2011

Some of the key challenges in Libya's current media sector can be traced to the legacy of Muammar Gaddafi's forty-two-year rule. Gaddafi devoted a chapter in his Green Book – which provided the ideological underpinning for his regime – to the media. In it, he dismissed the concept of press freedom as linked to the “problem of democracy,” and outlined a framework that would define Libya's media landscape for more than thirty years.¹⁰ During the Gaddafi period, the Libyan authorities owned most of the country's print and broadcast media and ensured they were tightly controlled. Until 2007, all informational output from television, radio and print media was supplied by the Jamahiriya News Agency (JANA), which in turn was closely administered by the Gaddafi regime. As part of tentative reforms in 2007, Gaddafi's son Saif al-Islam was permitted to establish the Ghad Media Corporation. It launched a television and radio station named Libiya, and two semi-private newspapers, Oya in Tripoli and Qureyna in Benghazi.¹¹

Gaddafi faced opposition - from attempted coups to popular resistance ranging from Islamist to non-Islamist - at several points during his four decades in power. Dissidents were often branded ‘irhabiyeen’ - or terrorists. The most serious challenge to the regime came in the 1990s, with the return of Libyan veterans of the war in Afghanistan. They formed a number of armed groups, particularly in eastern Libya, of which the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) was the largest. After the LIFG

made several assassination attempts of Gaddafi, the regime responded with a fierce crackdown. The regime used state media to portray these groups as extremists and terrorists.¹²

When anti-regime protests tipped into an armed uprising against Gaddafi's rule in early 2011, the Libyan leader deployed the same stratagem, insisting those opposing him were al-Qaeda, and foreign journalists reporting on the revolt were “al-Qaeda collaborators.”¹³ State media repeated these tropes, so much so that regime forces captured by the rebels later said they believed they were fighting al-Qaeda and not countering a popular uprising.¹⁴

Libya's media landscape in post-Gaddafi rule

After the Gaddafi regime fell in 2011, Libya's media landscape changed dramatically.¹⁵ In the initial post-Gaddafi period, new satellite television stations, radio stations and online and print media proliferated in an atmosphere of newly realised freedom.¹⁶ Many of these new outlets were founded and staffed by Libyans who had been active in the uprising or who had worked as ‘citizen journalists’ and fixers for foreign journalists during the period.¹⁷ Dozens of privately owned Libyan TV channels began to broadcast from either inside the country or outside, particularly from the Gulf and later from Jordan and Turkey. Some of these outlets have received funding from foreign governments.¹⁸ In recent years, this has tended to reflect the fault-lines of the civil conflict but transparency in ownership and financing within Libya's media sector in general remains limited.

The hope that Libya could develop a professionalised, independent media sector was short-lived. A lack of professionalism – whether among older journalists accustomed to Gaddafi era practices or younger journalists who considered themselves activists – exacerbated the situation, as did the growing use of social media by Libyans of all ages. Facebook, in particular, became a hugely popular way to reach large audiences as internet usage grew and more Libyans had access to social media.¹⁹ By 2020, Facebook had become the primary means of communication for two-

10 The Green Book was published in three parts: Part I: The Solution of the Problem of Democracy; Part II: The Solution of the Economic Problem; and Part III: The Social Basis of the Third Economic Theory. See: Muammar Gaddafi, *The Green Book* (The World Green Book Centre, 1975)

11 Altai Consulting, May 2013.

12 Mary Fitzgerald and Emad Badi, “The Limits of Reconciliation: Assessing the Revisions of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group,” Institute for Integrated Transitions, September 2020. Available at: <https://www.iiit-transitions.org/publications/major-publications-briefings/transitional-justice-and-violent-extremism/2-libya-limits-of-reconciliation-1.pdf/view>, accessed: 07 December 2020.

13 Josh Halliday, “Libya calls western journalists al-Qaida collaborators”, *The Guardian*, 24 February 2011. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/feb/24/libya-journalists-al-qaida>, accessed: 11 October 2020.

14 Interviews with author, Tripoli, August and September 2011.

15 Najla Dowson-Zeidan, Tim Eaton and Karen Wespieser, “After the revolution – what do Libyans and Tunisians believe about their media?” BBC Media Action, March 2015.

16 Rami Musa, “Media Landscapes: Libya,” November 2018.

17 The best known citizen journalist during the uprising was Mohammed Nabbous, who set up an independent internet TV station in Benghazi broadcasting raw feeds from the city before he was killed - apparently shot dead by regime loyalists - in March 2011. See: Elizabeth Flock, “Libyan citizen journalist Mohammed Nabbous killed in fighting in Benghazi,” *Washington Post*, 21 March 2011. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/libyan-citizen-journalist-mohammed-nabbous-killed-in-fighting-in-benghazi/2011/03/21/AB2rcA8_blog.html, accessed: 17 October 2020.

18 Interviews with the author, several Libyans said Nabbous' story inspired them to become citizen journalists that year. A number of Libyans who worked as fixers for foreign journalists during the 2011 uprising subsequently became local correspondents or stringers for major international media, including news agencies.

19 Interviews with senior editorial staff at some of these outlets, 2014-2019.

19 According to Facebook's internal calculations, an estimated 4 million Libyans use Facebook out of a population of 6.5 million, based on audience insights. See:

thirds of Libyans.²⁰

Politicians, militia leaders, religious figures and civil society activists used Facebook to issue statements, debate critics, or spread rumours and disinformation.²¹ Prominent figures and armed groups often had to contend with fake accounts springing up in their name in a bid to sow confusion. Print and broadcast media ran their own associated Facebook pages but were regularly guilty of posting poorly sourced content. Although media outlets were frequently accused of bias, their associated Facebook pages had significantly higher numbers of followers and higher levels of engagement in the form of “likes” compared to government Facebook pages or those belonging to armed groups and other entities.²²

The symbiotic use of Facebook by media outlets contributed to the lack of professionalism in the Libyan media sector. An echo chamber developed as journalists repeated in print and broadcast media – or their own social media accounts – what they had read on social media, often without fact-checking or verifying.²³

During the first years after the 2011 uprising, Libya struggled to establish viable political and security institutions in the face of threats from armed groups that had flourished in the post-Gaddafi vacuum. The deteriorating political and security situation had a profound impact on Libya’s media sector, with the country’s power struggles – both national and more localised – reflected in an increasingly polarised and politicised media landscape. Media outlets began dividing along factional lines, with television in particular becoming a platform for particular political currents, tribes and towns.²⁴ Media polarisation became particularly acute as Libya tipped into civil conflict in 2014. A growing number of Libyan journalists and television presenters began taking sides in 2014 and, in some cases, later engaged in incitement. Threats, abductions, and attacks against media outlets and journalists increased, and many media practitioners went into exile.²⁵

A key element of the power struggle that has

underpinned the civil conflict since is the fierce battle of narratives. Whilst this is true of conflicts more generally, in the Libyan case, it is more pronounced for historical and more contemporary reasons.

During the Gaddafi era, his regime not only strictly controlled domestic media, it also restricted access to, and movement within, Libya, resulting in limited media reporting and academic research on the country.²⁶ Most diplomatic missions and international organisations have not had a presence on the ground since 2014 when they evacuated during fighting in Tripoli. Foreign journalists have struggled to obtain visas and permits, particularly for Haftar’s stronghold in eastern Libya, which is also difficult to access for Libyan journalists from western Libya. In such a context, all sides in the conflict recognise the importance of controlling the story reported by the media whether for domestic consumption or to influence international policymaking.²⁷ Given the extent of foreign interference in the Libyan conflict, the latter is deemed particularly important.²⁸

Ongoing civil conflict has prevented the development and enforcement of an effective legal and regulatory framework for the Libyan media sector. With rival governments and armed forces contesting legitimacy, the country has not been able to progress in its post-Gaddafi transition and many laws from the previous regime remain in place. A draft constitution published in July 2017, yet to be approved in a public referendum, was criticised for not meeting international standards on freedom of expression and media protection.²⁹ In the interim, a constitutional declaration hastily drawn up during the 2011 uprising serves as Libya’s legislative framework.³⁰ It provides limited protection for the media.³¹

Libya was plunged into a fresh stage of conflict in April 2019 when Khalifa Haftar – a commander based in eastern Libya – launched an offensive to capture Tripoli from the internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), sparking a war that drew in a host of foreign backers, including the UAE, Russia and

NapoleonCat, “Facebook users in Libya,” Available at: <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-libya/2019/03>, accessed: 07 December 2020.

20 Khadeja Ramali, “A Light in Libya’s Fog of Disinformation,” Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 9 October 2020. Available at: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/light-libya-fog-disinformation/>, accessed: 04 December 2020.

21 Declan Walsh and Suliman Ali Zway, “A Facebook War: Libyans Battle on the Streets and on Screens,” New York Times, 4 September 2018. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/04/world/middleeast/libya-facebook.html>, accessed: 14 October 2020.

22 Democracy Reporting International, “Libya Social Media Monitoring Report Main Findings,” October 2019. Available at: <https://democracy-reporting.org/libya-social-media-report/main-findings/>, accessed: 09 December 2020.

23 Interview with a senior journalist from an international media organisation with a presence in Libya, December 2019.

24 In towns including Benghazi, Misrata and Bani Walid, business figures or community leaders opened TV channels that broadcast content aligned with dominant local political currents. National channels began tilting in particular directions, for example, Naba’s editorial line situated it firmly within the “revolutionary/Islamist” sphere while al-Aseemah was explicitly anti-Islamist. See Naji Abou Khalil and Laurence Hargreaves, “The Role of Media in Shaping Libya’s Security Sector Narratives,” United States Institute of Peace, April 2015. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2015/04/role-media-shaping-libyas-security-sector-narratives>, accessed: 09 December 2020.

25 Human Rights Watch, “War on the Media: Journalists under attack in Libya,” 09 February 2015. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/02/09/war-media-journalists-under-attack-libya>, accessed: 04 December 2020.

26 As one diplomat put it: “We had few frames of reference with which to understand deeper social dynamics and that meant many were scrambling after the fall of Gaddafi’s regime.” Interview with author, December 2019.

27 An example of how efforts by Haftar and his allies to paint entire constituencies in Libya as “terrorists” often bore fruit with foreign interlocutors can be seen in the case of Lev Dengov, the head of Russia’s contact group on Libya. In a March 2017 interview with Russian newspaper Kommersant, he said that before the contact group’s first visit to Misrata – a city where anti-Haftar sentiment is strong – he and his colleagues were “frightened,” adding “they – clearly a reference to Haftar’s camp – said that everyone there was completely Islamist, terrorists,” Elena Chernenko and Maxim Yusin, “In Libya, we do not want to be associated with any of the parties to the conflict,” Kommersant, 03 August, 2017. Available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3374208>, accessed: 09 December 2020.

28 “We exploit the gaps in their knowledge of Libya,” explained one figure with links to a number of partisan Libyan media outlets. Interview with author, 2016.

29 Reporters Without Borders, “Letter to Libyan constitution drafting committee,” 02 November 2017. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/news/letter-libyan-constitution-drafting-committee>, accessed: 04 December 2020.

30 The constitutional declaration was issued by the National Transitional Council in Benghazi in March 2011. A translated version of the full text is available at <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Handout%204%20-%20Libya%20Draft%20Interim%20Constitution.pdf>, accessed: 12 October 2020.

31 Ibid. Article 14 of the declaration stipulates that “freedom of opinion for individuals and groups, freedom of scientific research, freedom of communication, liberty of the press, printing, publication and mass media, freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, freedom of demonstration and freedom of peaceful strike shall be guaranteed by the State in accordance with the law.”

Turkey, and deepened media polarisation, increasing the risks for journalists.³²

In its 2020 World Press Freedom Index, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) noted that Libya's media and journalists were "now embroiled in an unprecedented crisis, with several media outlets being press-ganged into serving the various warring factions. As well as turning the media into propaganda outlets, the conflict's political and military actors have become news censors."³³

In its 2020 report on Libya, Freedom House noted:

Most Libyan media outlets are highly partisan, producing content that favours one of the country's political and military factions. The civil conflict and related violence by criminal and extremist groups have made objective reporting dangerous, and journalists are subject to intimidation and detention. In January 2019, a photographer was killed while covering clashes between militias south of Tripoli. Many journalists and media outlets have censored themselves or ceased operations to avoid retribution for their work, and journalists continue to flee the country. Many media outlets broadcasting from abroad also take partisan positions, use hostile rhetoric, and promote their favored side in the armed conflict.³⁴

A growing awareness about the weaponisation of Libyan media as part of the national power struggle has prompted a number of international organisations to try to tackle the issue. In July and October 2015, UNESCO facilitated discussions between editors and senior personnel at prominent Libyan media outlets as part of efforts to improve professional and ethical standards, and curb hate speech and incitement. But the initiative did not gain sufficient traction, in large part because some of the worst offending media outlets were not represented. "How can they possibly hope to do anything about this problem if they don't have media owner X and media owner Y and, more importantly, their external funders, in the room," lamented one editor who attended.³⁵ Other initiatives, including by the UN support mission to Libya, various foreign embassies and international organisations such as BBC Media Action and the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, have had limited impact for similar reasons. More recent home-grown efforts include Falso, a digital research platform launched by the Libyan Centre for Freedom of the Press in 2020. It aims to monitor Libyan media content for hate speech, incitement, and what it refers to as "misleading news."³⁶

Terrorist groups in Libya

To understand how media outlets have reported on terrorism in Libya - and how the "terrorist" label has been used as a smear by political and armed factions there - a survey of designated terrorist groups operating in Libya is required. Since 2011, a range of jihadist groups, from the Islamic State group (IS) to al-Qaeda-linked groups and other Salafi-jihadi currents, have had a presence in Libya.³⁷ Some have been wholly or predominantly indigenous and rooted in particular local contexts while others - particularly IS affiliates - have included a significant number of foreigners, at both leadership and rank and file level. For the purpose of this paper, the word "terrorist" applies to only those groups that have been designated as such by the UN.

Libya's jihadist sphere can be divided along three generations. The oldest generation comprises many who fought against Soviet-backed forces in Afghanistan. These veterans later created a number of groups in opposition to Gaddafi, the largest of which was the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). Some former members of the LIFG left to join al-Qaeda but the group's leadership refused any affiliation with al-Qaeda and insisted their objective was solely overthrowing Gaddafi.³⁸ The LIFG was considered defunct prior to the 2011 uprising.

The second and third generation of jihadists - the former including those who fought in Iraq after 2003, the latter including those who fought in Syria after 2011 - tilt towards more radical ideologies. The Libyans that have joined IS tend to come from these younger generations.

Islamic State (IS) in Libya

In 2014, Libya's first IS affiliate was established in the eastern town of Derna by locals who had returned from Syria. The Derna branch was formed with help from senior non-Libyan IS figures.³⁹ IS was expelled from Derna in 2015 by a coalition of forces which included the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council (DMSC), an umbrella group comprising fighters including veterans of the former LIFG. The DMSC joined with anti-Haftar military personnel to successfully force IS from the town.⁴⁰

In early 2015, IS began to build a presence in Sirte, Gaddafi's hometown. It consolidated control of the town by engaging with residents who felt aggrieved over the city's marginalisation in post-Gaddafi Libya. Sirte became

32 International Crisis Group, "Interpreting Haftar's Gambit in Libya," ICG, 04 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/interpreting-haftars-gambit-libya>, accessed: 04 December 2020.

33 Reporters Without Borders, "World Press Freedom Index," Libya ranking. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/libya>, accessed: 09 December 2020.

34 Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2020." Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/libya/freedom-world/2020>, accessed: 09 December 2020.

35 Interview with author, October 2015.

36 Falso is available at www.falso.ly, accessed: 30 October 2020.

37 Mattia Toaldo and Mary Fitzgerald, "A Quick Guide to Libya's Main Players," European Council on Foreign Relations, 19 May 2016. Available at: https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_libya_conflict/, accessed: 07 December 2020.

38 Author's interviews with several members of the LIFG shura council, including former LIFG emir Abdelhakim Belhaj and chief ideologue Sami al-Saadi, 2011-2019.

39 Frederic Wehrey and Ala' Alrababa'h, "Rising Out of Chaos: the Islamic State in Libya," Carnegie Endowment, 05 March 2015. Available at: <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59268>, accessed: 07 December 2020.

40 Toaldo and Fitzgerald, 19 May 2016.

IS' stronghold in Libya until late 2016 when a coalition of Misrata-dominated forces known as Bunyan al-Marsous (BAM) routed the affiliate there.⁴¹ In Benghazi, as Haftar's operation continued, those fighting his forces began to include Libyan and foreign members of IS.

Today, IS no longer holds territory in Libya. According to most intelligence estimates, there are fewer than 1,000 IS members in the country, mostly dispersed across its south-west and central regions. Though now much weakened, the group retains the capacity to carry out attacks, mostly on military checkpoints.⁴²

Ansar al-Sharia and other al-Qaeda affiliates in Libya

Formed in 2012 by a small core of former anti-Gaddafi fighters, Ansar al-Sharia's first branch was established in Benghazi, but affiliates also emerged in towns such as Derna, Sirte and Ajdabiya. The UN put Ansar al-Sharia on its al-Qaeda sanctions list in 2014, describing it as a group associated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al-Mourabitoun.⁴³ Both AQIM and al-Mourabitoun have a presence in Libya, particularly in the south. Individuals associated with Ansar al-Sharia participated in the September 2012 attacks on the US diplomatic mission in Benghazi.⁴⁴ At its core an armed group, Ansar al-Sharia developed a strategy between 2012 and 2014, centred on preaching and charitable work to build popular support and drive recruitment.⁴⁵

In response to Haftar's armed campaign, Ansar al-Sharia's Benghazi unit merged with other militias to form the Benghazi Revolutionary Shura Council (BRSC) in the summer of 2014. Between 2014 and 2017, most of Ansar al-Sharia's leaders were killed in fighting with Haftar's forces in Benghazi, where the group had been strongest. Many of its rank and file in Benghazi and other towns subsequently defected to other al-Qaeda-linked groups or to IS. Thus, weakened and routed from the cities and towns where it once had a presence, Ansar al-Sharia announced its dissolution in May 2017.⁴⁶

The challenge of language

The language of media reporting on terrorism has long been contested, particularly in conflict environments where belligerents brand their opponents as terrorists even if they have not been designated as such. BBC editorial guidelines, often used as a reference by other

media outlets and independent journalists, advise BBC journalists not to use the term "terrorist" without attribution, noting that "terrorism is a difficult and emotive subject with significant political overtones and care is required in the use of language that carries value judgements...The word "terrorist" itself can be a barrier rather than an aid to understanding."⁴⁷

If Libyan media limited their use of the word "terrorist" - or "irhabi" in Arabic - to groups that are designated by the UN as such, the term would only be applied to IS, AQIM and other al-Qaeda affiliates, including the now dissolved Ansar al-Sharia.

Instead, the word has been weaponised by partisan Libyan media outlets and individual commentators, whether on television discussion programmes or social media. The wide use of the word to denigrate, defame or insult has often had consequences, including detention or violent attack, for those targeted. The term has also been frequently employed opportunistically to justify the use of force against political or military opponents rather than members of designated groups.

Since Haftar launched his first operation in May 2014, targeting rival armed groups including Islamist militias in Benghazi while also violently attacking the Tripoli-based parliament, known as the General National Congress, he and his political and media allies have used the term as a key part of their narrative to gain popular support for their actions.⁴⁸ In doing so, they not only exploited the legacy of Gaddafi-era propaganda, but built on it.

Libya Awalan, a TV channel owned by businessman Hassan Tatanaki, then a key supporter of Haftar's campaign, proved critical in painting all opponents of the operation as terrorists in 2014. "[Media] plays a very big part for us, just as much as the military side," Tatanaki said in August that year.⁴⁹ "I was quite surprised how influential media is — it's scary. You can swing people's opinions left to right at a whim." The fact that decades of Gaddafi's propaganda had resulted in many Libyans conflating Islamists of all stripes as terrorists played in their favour, as he said:

Libyans perceive the Muslim Brotherhood and any Islamist group as being al-Qaeda or ISIS or whatever; that is what Qaddafi's brainwashing did... They don't see the Islamic movement as a social or political movement; they see it as a terrorist movement already. That helps our cause. That is what we are relying on.⁵⁰

While some of the groups Haftar fought in eastern Libya

41 Ibid.

42 Saleh Sarrar and Samer Al-Atrush, "Islamic State Claims Suicide Attack on Libyan Foreign Ministry," Bloomberg News, 25 December 2018. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-12-25/gunmen-attack-libyan-foreign-ministry-in-tripoli>, accessed: 12 October 2020.

43 Toaldo and Fitzgerald, 19 May 2016.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 BBC Editorial Guidelines, "Section 11: War, Terror and Emergencies." BBC. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/editorialguidelines/guidelines/war-terror-emergencies/guidelines>, accessed: 09 December 2020.

48 Toaldo and Fitzgerald, 19 May 2016.

49 Mary Fitzgerald, "Libya's New Power Brokers?" Foreign Policy, 27 August 2014. Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/27/libyas-new-power-brokers/>, accessed: 02 October 2020.

50 Ibid.

had ties to IS and al-Qaeda, he continued to use the “terrorist” narrative to explain and justify his offensive to capture Tripoli from the UN-recognised government in April 2019 even as senior UN officials said it looked more like a coup.⁵¹ In early 2020, pro-Haftar media outlets used the “terrorist” label to refer to Syrian mercenaries sent by Turkey in support of the counter-offensive against Haftar.⁵²

In a 2019 report on social media and conflict in Libya, PeaceTech Lab detailed how respondents from focus groups had indicated that supporters of Haftar and his forces use the term “irhabiyeen” often against “anyone who is not a supporter or who is critical of their actions.”⁵³ It noted that people may be labelled as such “based on their actions, religious or political beliefs, or appearance—particularly more conservative appearances associated with strict adherents of Islam.”

Given the particular nature of Libya’s media landscape and the echo chamber link between social media and more traditional forms like broadcast and print, such use of language tends to loop between the various media, feeding and entrenching particular narratives within the popular imagination.

Findings

Weaponising Libya’s media and weaponising the word “terrorism”

In the initial phase after the fall of the Gaddafi regime, media reporting of terrorist groups in Libya was sparse. This was due partly to the chaotic media landscape in the country in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 uprising, with new outlets opening and closing soon afterwards due to poor financing and lacking of training and professional management. Furthermore, the terrorist presence was limited to scattered elements linked to AQIM, particularly around Derna in eastern Libya and in the country’s southern flank. The Libyan public imagination was not yet focused on the threat of terrorism and this was reflected in domestic media coverage.⁵⁴

That changed with the September 2012 attack on a US

diplomatic compound in Benghazi which claimed the lives of American ambassador Chris Stevens and three of his colleagues. It brought a spotlight on extremist groups present in Benghazi and other parts of eastern Libya, particularly Ansar al-Sharia, which had been formed earlier that year.

Libya’s media landscape became notably more polarised after February 2014, the month when Haftar was accused by then-Prime Minister Ali Zeidan of attempting a coup. Critics of the General National Congress (GNC) – which had been elected in July 2012 – insisted its mandate had expired, though this was contested by others, including a number of foreign diplomats. Libya Awalan, the television channel owned by businessman Hassan Tatanaki, began a campaign against the GNC, claiming it was “illegal” and dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵⁵ It also accused some parliamentary blocs of “supporting terrorism.”⁵⁶

When Haftar launched his operation in Benghazi in May that year, Libya Awalan was one of his main supporters. It framed his operation as an anti-terrorist campaign aimed at “cleaning Benghazi from the Brotherhood and the khawarij”⁵⁷ - the latter a reference to a sect that revolted against one of early caliphs of Islam and broke away from the mainstream. The term “khawarij” has become widespread in Libya since 2014 to pejoratively describe those who are perceived to misuse Islam through extremism and is often used interchangeably with the word “terrorist” or “Daeshi” (a reference to a member of IS).

Echoing Haftar’s scattergun approach, not only did Libya Awalan directly accuse Ansar al-Sharia of being responsible for assassinations and bombings in Benghazi, it also conflated other armed units – including brigades that identified as revolutionary rather than Islamist – with the group, thus implying their complicity in terrorist activity.⁵⁸

Libya Awalan’s coverage illustrated how partisan reporting of the war in Benghazi served to obscure realities on the ground there and later elsewhere in the country. The tendency by pro-Haftar media, including Libya Awalan, to blanket label all critics and opponents of his operation as “terrorists” or “terrorist sympathisers” created a febrile atmosphere. One result was that activity by elements linked to al-Qaeda or, from late 2014, Islamic State, was often overlooked or not taken

51 Ahmed Elumami, and Ulf Laessing, “UN Libya envoy says Haftar made coup attempt with advance on Tripoli,” Reuters, 15 April 2019. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-idUSKCN1RR1NI>, accessed: 11 October 2020.

52 This was particularly true of coverage in Al-Marsad, a pro-Haftar online publication with both Arabic and English language versions. Democracy Reporting International has described Al-Marsad as dominating the Libyan digital space with high levels of audience engagement and “a proven ability to dictate certain events as newsworthy.” See: Democracy Reporting International, “Libyan Social Media Monitoring Report, December 2018-October 2019.” Democracy Reporting International, 08 June 2020. Available at: <https://democracy-reporting.org/libya-social-media-report/main-findings/>, accessed: 07 December 2020.

According to research conducted by Falso, the monitoring platform launched by the Libyan Centre for Freedom of the Press, Al-Marsad publishes more “fake and misleading news” than any other outlet they surveyed. Falso, “Announcing the release of the first research report on Hate speech and fake news on social media.” Falso Report, 21 October 2020. Available at: <https://falso.ly/en/2020/10/21/announcing-the-release-of-the-first-research-report-on-hate-speech-and-fake-news-on-social-media/>, accessed: 30 October 2020.

53 Jacqueline Lacroix et al., “Social media and conflict in Libya: a lexicon of hate speech terms,” PeaceTech Lab, 19 June 2019. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54257189e4b0ac0d5fca1566/t/5d0a6faf6246f7000131b90b/1560965089255/PeaceTech+Lab+Libya+Hate+Speech+Lexicon.pdf>, accessed: 07 December 2020.

54 Author’s observations of the Libyan media landscape October 2011-September 2012 and interviews with Libyan print and broadcast journalists.

55 Naji Abou Khalil and Laurence Hargreaves, “Perceptions of Security in Libya: Institutional and Revolutionary Actors” United States Institute of Peace, 30 April 2015. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2015/04/perceptions-security-libya>, accessed: 07 December 2020.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

seriously enough by anti-Haftar factions who believed his campaign was a pretext to ultimately impose himself as military ruler.

From late summer 2014, the word “terrorist” was being used by the House of Representatives (elected in June that year to replace the GNC)⁵⁹ to describe the Libyan Dawn coalition (a mix of Islamist and non-Islamist armed groups) that had driven rival militias – then aligned with Haftar – from Tripoli. The House of Representatives (HoR) had been due to sit in Benghazi but decided to move to the eastern town of Tobruk. Prime Minister Abdullah Thinni fled to the eastern town of Baida where he aligned himself with Haftar – after denouncing him as a renegade just months before – and adopted a similar narrative. Foreign diplomats and journalists familiar with the reality of the situation in Tripoli were dismissive of such crude propaganda. “Interviewing Thinni and his colleagues at that time was extremely frustrating,” said a journalist for a major international media organisation.⁶⁰ He added: “They kept insisting that terrorists were controlling Tripoli, that al-Qaeda were in charge there. It was embarrassing. We just left it out of our reports.”

But if reputable foreign media were not reporting that narrative, officials from Thinni’s government, their allies in the HoR and figures from Haftar’s coalition kept propagating it through sympathetic outlets, including Libyan and pan-Arab television channels. Libya Awalan was joined by a number of other pro-Haftar channels, including one named Karama (Dignity) after the title Haftar had given his armed campaign, which became particularly notorious for incitement in support of his operation. Its presenters explicitly named individuals as “terrorists” or entire families as “terrorist sympathisers” on air, sometimes giving their addresses, which led to the targeting of both people and property. “It was shocking,” recalled one Libyan journalist. “This was pure incitement. A dangerous hysteria had taken hold.”⁶¹ At times, the label was used opportunistically. “It became a trend to accuse political or business competitors as terrorists so they can be eliminated,” said another journalist.⁶²

Pro-Haftar channels, including Libya Awalan, also broadcast the forced confessions of detainees captured by his forces. In a June 2015 report, Human Rights Watch (HRW) documented how individuals held at Criminal Investigation Department in Benghazi and at Bersis prison east of the city said their homes were attacked and set on fire after their “confessions” were broadcast.⁶³ One detainee interviewed by HRW said he was forced to appear on Libya Awalan to confess to crimes he did not commit:

They arrested me at my house and were accusing me of being a fighter. A TV crew came to the prison and filmed me. The correspondent, his assistant, and an officer were all present in the room when the filming was under way. They stopped filming three or four times and the officer would beat me because they wanted me to “confess” that I consider the army and the police to be apostates. The correspondent would say “this detainee is not yet ready” and the beatings would continue.⁶⁴

Another detainee at Bersis prison told HRW he had been forced to appear four or five times on television and that he had confessed to killing eighty-two people and involvement in the killing of the US ambassador in September 2012.⁶⁵ HRW observed that marks on the detainee’s upper arms appeared consistent with his allegations that he had been beaten in custody.

Abdulrazak al Naduri, Haftar’s Chief of Staff, told HRW: “The televised confessions [of detainees] were an ill-studied project by the General Intelligence Agency to try and raise awareness on the dangers of terrorism, yet it ended up being a double-edged sword.” Other than this claim by Naduri, there was no other evidence that such an initiative existed. The use of televised confessions underscored the simplistic approach of Haftar’s LAAF to counter terrorism more generally, whether militarily or through strategic communication.

Recycling terrorist propaganda

One of the challenges faced by Libyan media outlets in their reporting on designated terrorist groups has been how to navigate and dissect the propaganda such groups produced and circulated, particularly on social media.

Between 2012 and 2014, Ansar al-Sharia developed a relatively sophisticated media operation under its al-Raya Media Productions Foundation. As with other jihadist groups, it also maintained an active social media presence. It utilised platforms including Facebook, Twitter and Google Plus to disseminate propaganda – including showcasing its charitable work and anti-drugs campaigns – and attract new recruits.⁶⁶ The group also used its network of Twitter accounts to circulate audio clips from a radio station that it had established in Benghazi. Ansar al-Sharia’s social media accounts were regularly shut down following complaints to Facebook and Twitter but the group swiftly launched new versions.

59 The House of Representatives, elected in June 2014, was later incorporated into the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA). Signed in late 2015, the LPA established the internationally recognised Government of National Accord in Tripoli and extended the mandate of the House of Representatives – based in eastern Libya – though the House of Representatives never fully ratified the agreement.

60 Interview with author, February 2020.

61 Interview with author, February 2020.

62 Interview with author, February 2020.

63 Human Rights Watch, “Libya: Widespread Torture in Detention,” June 2015. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/17/libya-widespread-torture-detention#:~:text=In%20January%20and%20April%202015,detainees%20individually%20without%20guards%20present,accessed:07%20December%202020>.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Mary Fitzgerald, “Jihadism and its Relationship with Youth Culture: The Case of Ansar al-Sharia in Libya,” in Luigi Narbone, Agnès Favier and Virginie Collombier, eds., *Inside Wars, Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya* (Florence: European University Institute, 2016)

were fabricated.⁷⁴

In general, Libyan media outlets tended to report on Ansar al-Sharia by lifting content from its own platforms. Hence, media coverage very often resulted in the unwitting amplification of the group's messaging. There was little debate over how such media coverage might provide "the oxygen of publicity" to a group that was already trying to win hearts and minds through charitable activities and providing civil services such as maintenance of public areas. There were few attempts to either investigate how Ansar al-Sharia operated or interrogate its leaders, partly due to fears that individual journalists or the outlets they worked for could be targeted as a result.

One notable exception was the Libya Al Ahrar television channel. It not only reported on allegations that the Ansar al-Sharia members were responsible for assassinations in Benghazi, but brought its leader Mohamed al-Zahawi on air to respond to such accusations. In November 2013, Mahmoud al-Barassi, a member of Ansar al-Sharia's shura council, gave an interview to Libya Al Ahrar, in which he denounced the transitional government, the army and the police as apostates. He declared that Ansar al-Sharia would "fight people who seek democracy and secularism" as well as anyone who opposes the group.⁶⁷ In the eyes of many Libyans, that broadcast revealed "the real face" of Ansar al-Sharia.⁶⁸

Soon after its takeover of Sirte, Islamic State commandeered the local offices of state television and two private radio stations, converting them into mouthpieces. As Libya began to feature heavily in IS propaganda⁶⁹ - whether videos of mass killings⁷⁰ or articles in the group's Dabiq magazine⁷¹ - the dearth of professionalism within Libya's media sector meant that domestic media struggled to provide coverage that was not sensationalist. Several outlets broadcast or published gruesome footage and images from IS attacks,⁷² often lifted directly from IS propaganda. Others rushed to report claims of responsibility even if the sourcing was thin.⁷³ A number of outlets aired interviews with Libyan personalities claiming the videos of mass killings by IS

Risks and challenges for journalists reporting on terrorism in Libya

With Libya's slide into civil conflict in 2014, journalists increasingly became targets. The growing partisanship of many media outlets led belligerents on all sides to view media in general but also individual journalists as part of the conflict. RSF ranked Libya as the fifth most deadly country for journalists in 2014. Shortly after Haftar launched his operation in Benghazi in May that year, Miftah Bouzeid, the editor of Burniq newspaper and a prominent critic of Islamist groups, was shot dead in the city. Later that year, Motassem Warfalli, a radio presenter whom RSF said was "known to be a supporter of Ansar al-Sharia" was killed by gunmen.⁷⁵

The two Libyan towns where Islamic State either gained a significant hold after 2014 (Derna) or took over entirely (Sirte) suffered from a media vacuum, not least because of the risks of ground reporting.

In April 2015, four Libyan journalists and an Egyptian cameraman with local channel Barqa TV were found dead near the town of al-Bayda in eastern Libya, having been abducted in 2014.⁷⁶ Two Tunisian journalists were kidnapped near the eastern town of Brega in September 2014 and never seen again. Militants linked to IS were accused of responsibility in both cases.⁷⁷

The disappearance of a number of Libyan and foreign journalists believed to have been abducted by IS in Libya, along with the filmed beheadings by IS of American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff - both of whom were known in Libya because they had spent extended periods there reporting on the 2011 uprising - in Syria, showed the dangers of reporting from territory where IS had a presence.⁷⁸

67 Libya Herald staff, "Ansar al-Sharia threatens bloodshed in Benghazi," Libya Herald, 25 November 2013. Available at: <https://www.libyaherald.com/2013/11/25/ansar-al-sharia-threatens-bloodshed-in-libya/#axzz2lmO026JJ>, accessed: 02 October 2020.

68 Interviews with author, November 2013.

69 Charlie Winter, "Libya: The Strategic Gateway for the Islamic State," Quilliam Foundation, 17 February 2015. Available at: <https://www.quilliaminternational.com/shop/e-publications/libya-the-strategic-gateway-for-the-islamic-state/>, accessed: 07 December 2020.

70 David D. Kirkpatrick and Rukmini Callimachi, "Islamic State Video Shows Beheadings of Egyptian Christians in Libya," New York Times, 15 February 2015. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/16/world/middleeast/islamic-state-video-beheadings-of-21-egyptian-christians.html>, accessed: 07 December 2020. See also: Sylvia Westall, "Islamic State shoots and beheads 30 Ethiopian Christians in Libya: video," Reuters, 19 April 2015. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-islamicstate-killings/islamic-state-shoots-and-beheads-30-ethiopian-christians-in-libya-video-idUSKBN0NA0IE20150419?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>, accessed: 07 December 2020.

71 In Dabiq issue 5 and 6 (published in October and December 2014), IS claimed that, of all the countries where it had recently expanded, the group had its strongest presence in Libya. In 2015, the magazine covered attacks it had carried out in Libya. In issue 11 - published in September 2015 - it focused on the opportunities presented by Libya's geo-strategic position and its oil wealth, saying "All Muslims have a right to these resources."

72 This was the case with IS videos showing the mass beheadings of Egyptian Christians in February 2015 and Ethiopian Christians in April 2015. Several Libyan media outlets reproduced excerpts from the videos. When IS bombed the eastern town of Qubba in February 2015, killing at least 40 people, local media broadcast gruesome footage of the immediate aftermath.

73 Haftar's LAAF were often swift to claim IS was behind a particular attack - and its aligned media outlets would report that claim as fact - even if IS did not issue a statement claiming responsibility.

74 Some foreign media outlets ran similar claims. In an interview with Vice in April 2015, former parliamentarian Mohammed Busidra claimed that an IS-made clip showing the execution of 21 Egyptian Christians on a beach in Libya that February was "a Hollywood-style production." See: John Beck, "On the frontline of Libya's fight against the Islamic State," Vice News, 14 April 2015. Available at: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/wjae55/on-the-frontline-of-libyas-fight-against-the-islamic-state>, accessed: October 11 2020.

75 Reporters Without Borders, "Libya still extremely dangerous for journalists," Reporters Without Borders, 14 October 2014. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/news/libya-still-extremely-dangerous-journalists>, accessed: 07 December 2020.

76 Committee to Protect Journalists, "Missing Journalists Database." Available at: <https://cpj.org/data/people/mohammed-galal-okasha/>, accessed: 10 October 2020.

77 Ibid.

78 A journalist based in Benghazi who was a friend of Steven Sotloff was so affected by his killing that they refused to report on IS or other jihadist groups. Interview with the author, February 2015.

There were also dangers for journalists who challenged the narratives of partisan actors. Journalists – both Libyan and foreign – who sought to relay a more nuanced portrait of the situation in Derna, for example, were threatened and intimidated. “If I didn’t echo the language of Haftar and his supporters and describe all the people they were fighting as “terrorists”, his supporters came after me on social media. I was terrified the attacks would spill over into real life,” said one reporter.⁷⁹ Several were subjected to smear campaigns on social media accusing them of being “terrorist sympathisers” or “terrorist supporters.”⁸⁰ A number were detained and questioned by Haftar’s forces.

A Libyan who worked for international media noted that it was only when he moved abroad that he felt he could write about the situation. “I didn’t cover Derna when I was living in Libya because anything that ran contrary to [Haftar’s camp] propaganda was considered a threat and that was dangerous for me. Being outside gave me the space to report what was happening.”⁸¹

The launch of a military operation to rout IS from Sirte in May 2016 provided media an opportunity to report from the town, albeit while embedded with Bunyan al-Marsous, the coalition of ground forces established by the UN-backed government in Tripoli. Journalists covering the battle for Sirte had to navigate the limitations of embedding, given they could see only what the forces they accompanied wanted them to see. Some of the Libyan reporters also had to deal with smears by Haftar supporters, unhappy that their opponents (Bunyan al-Marsous was comprised largely of anti-Haftar forces) could claim credit for dislodging IS from its Libyan stronghold. “I was accused of all sorts of things because I reported on the battle for Sirte,” recalled one Libyan journalist who worked for a foreign media outlet. “The victory of Bunyan al-Marsous over IS was an embarrassment for Haftar because he wanted to claim the monopoly on fighting terrorism.”⁸²

Media workers were targeted during the Tripoli war sparked by Haftar’s offensive in 2019. In August that year, armed men – believed to be Haftar aligned – targeted Mohamed Eshbeni, a journalist and presenter at Tanasuh television channel. “The gunmen threatened me because I work as a journalist and said I was part of Muslim Brotherhood Group and Libyan Fighting Group [LIFG].” Eshbeni wrote on his Facebook page.⁸³

The risks to journalists attempting nuanced reporting of Libya’s complex security dynamics remain high, particularly in eastern Libya. As one reporter observed:

Being a reporter on the ground is like operating in a minefield as any mistake could cost you your life or put you at risk of being a target of public condemnation and discrimination. If you allow their opponents express their views or you attempt to portray things objectively, you might be accused of being a terrorist sympathiser or infiltrator. Those who work for foreign media are particularly vulnerable because when reputable foreign media outlets attempt to shed light on the facts in an unbiased way and free of agendas, it will conflict with coverage by the highly biased and polarized Libyan media. Many journalists - both local and foreign - reporting from on the ground practice self-censorship to avoid being targeted by either security actors or partisan TV commentators and angry mobs on social media.⁸⁴

The impact of citizen journalism on media reporting of terrorism

In Derna and Sirte, a handful of local stringers and activists tried to convey what was happening on the ground using social media networks – often under pseudonymous accounts – or passing information to journalists from Libyan and international media outlets. But verification remained a challenge, particularly when it came to information provided by activists. This was particularly true of the Derna situation, where supporters of Haftar’s campaign sought to lump together all his opponents there as “Daesh” or “al-Qaeda”, which obscured the more complicated realities on the ground.⁸⁵ As a result, a number of foreign media outlets relying on activists inaccurately asserted that IS “controlled” the town.⁸⁶ This dependence on partisan sources and second or third hand information together with poor – or no – verification processes produced reporting that was problematic on several levels.

In 2015, questionably sourced reports began surfacing in Libyan and foreign media outlets regarding the situation in Derna that appeared to conveniently echo stories about IS in Syria and Iraq. One example was the

79 Interview with author, February 2020.

80 Interviews with Libyan and foreign journalists subjected to such campaigns, January 2020.

81 Interview with author, February 2020.

82 Interview with author, February 2020.

83 Facebook post no longer accessible. The post was reported by the Libya Observer, an anti-Haftar website. See also: Abdulkader Assad, “Haftar’s terrorist sleeper cells targeting activists, journalists and officials in Tripoli,” Libya Observer, 27 August 2019. Available at: <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/haftars-terrorist-sleeper-cells-targeting-activists-journalists-and-officials-tripoli>, accessed: 20 October 2020.

84 Interview with author, February 2020.

85 For a more detailed overview of the situation on the ground in Derna during that period, see International Crisis Group, “How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb,” 24 July 2017. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/178-how-islamic-state-rose-fell-and-could-rise-again-maghreb>, accessed 09 December 2020.

86 Between late 2014 - when IS established a presence in Derna - and July 2015 - when it was driven from the town, international media outlets regularly made the inaccurate claim that IS controlled the town. One example was a report by CNN headlined “ISIS Comes to Libya” which asserted “Fighters loyal to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria are now in complete control of the city of Derna.” The report was later cited in other media coverage repeating the claim including in Time magazine. See: Paul Cruickshank, Nic Robertson, Tim Lister and Jomana Karadsheh, “ISIS Comes to Libya”, CNN, November 18, 2014. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2014/11/18/world/isis-libya/index.html?hpt=hp_c1, accessed: 17 October 2020. Another example was an article by Libyan commentator Mohamed Eljarh in Foreign Policy where he asserts “Because IS forces are in control in Derna, it’s hard to get a picture of what’s going on there.” See: Mohamed Eljarh, “A Snapshot of the Islamic State’s Libyan Stronghold,” Foreign Policy, 01 April 2015. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/01/a-snapshot-of-the-islamic-states-libyan-stronghold-derna-libya-isis/>, accessed: 17 October 2020.

“child brides in Derna” story that appeared in a number of foreign media outlets. One such report quoted a local activist claiming that there were “four to five cases of under-age brides” being married off to foreign IS militants every week in the town, an eye-catching assertion given the population of Derna (over 100,000).⁸⁷ The activist went on to detail stories of “sex-related injuries” along with “the spread of STDs and the growing prevalence of miscarriages, premature and stillbirths.” These claims were challenged by a number of Libyan commentators, including commentators from Derna.⁸⁸

On several occasions when it came to coverage of Derna, media reports were clearly reliant on single sourcing and as a result lacked not only balance but also accuracy. In one example, a 2016 report in the *Libya Herald*, a widely read English language online publication, repeated what a single unnamed source had said about Muftah Hamza, an army officer who opposed Haftar. Hamza had joined forces - along with other anti-Haftar officers - with the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council (DMSC) to drive IS from the town.⁸⁹ The DMSC denied any affiliation or link with al-Qaeda. Not only did the *Libya Herald* repeat unquestioningly the source’s inaccurate assertion that Hamza was a member of the DMSC, it also repeated without question the source’s claim that he was “an extremist with links to al-Qaeda.”⁹⁰ Furthermore, the article did not include any response from Hamza to the allegations made against him. Such practices were not limited to coverage of Derna but were widespread across the Libyan media landscape, underscoring the lack of professionalism in a sector where many reporters began their careers as “citizen journalists” and most had no training in areas such as media ethics or media law.

Exploiting the terrorism media narrative - at home and abroad

A particularly revealing example of how Libyan partisans have sought to exploit media to smear their opponents as terrorists was highlighted by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) in 2017. According to the CPJ, al-Nabaa television channel broadcast a leaked audio recording of a conversation between Mahmoud al-Misrati, a media owner known for his provocative online and broadcast commentary,⁹¹ and an unidentified aide to Haftar in March that year.⁹² In the recording, the two discuss a campaign to smear the Benghazi Defence

Brigades (BDB – an armed group which had recently seized control of eastern Libya oil facilities from Haftar’s forces and handed control of them to the Government of National Accord in Tripoli) as terrorists. The BDB was comprised of former military personnel, police officers and militiamen opposed to Haftar’s campaign. According to the aired recording, the aide said that Haftar’s camp wanted to convince people that al-Qaeda had taken over the facilities.

The CPJ detailed how, in a call with an al-Nabaa reporter, al-Misrati confirmed the authenticity of the audio recording and accused al-Nabaa - which had an anti-Haftar editorial line - of being run by terrorists. “Yes, I do steer public opinion,” he stated. “I manufacture public opinion and shape it, and we are the ones who guide people.”

In the same statement, the CPJ condemned an attack on the Tripoli offices of al-Nabaa by gunmen who set the building on fire and stole administrative records. The CPJ noted that hours after al-Nabaa was targeted, another television channel named al-Raseefa – which was generally sympathetic to Haftar’s faction – published on its Facebook page personal details of al-Nabaa employees including names and salaries and described the station as “terrorist media.”

As foreign meddling in the Libyan conflict increased, so too did what appeared to be often coordinated messaging between Libyan media outlets affiliated with various factions and pan-Arab media aligned with their respective regional backers.

In June 2017, the defence and national security committee of the House of Representatives based in eastern Libya drew up a list of Libyans and Libyan entities – including al-Nabaa channel and Tanasuh, an anti-Haftar TV station linked to the former mufti Sadeq al-Gheriani – it accused of cooperating with Qatar or being involved in terrorism. It echoed a similar list published by Gulf States blockading Qatar. The House of Representatives list was published in full by several Libyan and regional media outlets, most of them pro-Haftar. The High Council of State, a body established as part of the Libyan Political Agreement signed in 2015, said those who compiled the list were “using the term terrorism to vilify and denigrate their political opponents.”⁹³

In April 2019, Haftar launched an offensive to capture Tripoli from the UN-recognised GNA. Haftar’s camp

87 Bel Trew, “Families give young girls as Isis brides in exchange for protection,” *The Times*, 11 May 2015. Available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/families-give-young-girls-as-isis-brides-in-exchange-for-protection-8rqgz6cftpq>, accessed: 07 December 2020.

88 Mohamed Eljarh, “Islamic State Social Policies Aren’t Exactly a Hit With Libyans,” *Foreign Policy*, 05 June 2015. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/05/islamic-state-social-policies-arent-exactly-a-hit-with-libyan-libya-derna-child-brides-women/>, accessed: 15 April 2020.

89 Ajnadin Mustafa, “Obeidat leaders rejects Misrata deal and recognition of GNA,” *Libya Herald*, August 21 2016. Available at <https://www.libyaherald.com/2016/08/21/obeidat-leaders-rejects-misrata-deal-and-recognition-of-gna/>, accessed: 14 October 2020.

90 Ibid.

91 Two years previously Mahmoud al-Misrati was one of the Libyan media figures who took part in UNESCO-facilitated discussions in Spain that resulted in what was described as the “Madrid Declaration: Towards Professional Media: The Role of Libyan Media and its Responsibility in Times of Crisis.” The signatories affirmed “their commitment to promote freedom of expression, fair and accurate journalism and the absolute rejection of all forms of hate speech and incitement to violence.” See: Raja’a El Abasi, “The Role of Libyan Media and its Responsibility in times of Crises,” UNESCO, 01 August 2015. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/news/role-libyan-media-and-its-responsibility-times-crises>, accessed: 18 October 2020.

92 Committee to Protect Journalists, “Libyan TV channel attacked, burned,” 17 March 2017. Available at: <https://cpj.org/2017/03/libyan-tv-channel-attacked-burned/>, accessed: 14 March 2020.

93 *Libya Herald* reporter, “HoR promotes hatred and violence with list of “terrorists” says Libya’s Uganda ambassador; full list published,” *Libya Herald*, 12 June 2017. Available at <https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/06/12/hor-promotes-hatred-and-violence-with-list-of-terrorists-says-libyas-uganda-ambassador-full-list-published/>, accessed: 16 October 2020.

and their allied media outlets subsequently fell back on old tropes to justify their offensive, framing the resulting battle as one against “terrorist groups” and militias which helped fan hate speech and incitement, particularly on social media. Evidence emerged of foreign-initiated pro-Haftar social media campaigns which painted his opponents as terrorists.⁹⁴ The House of Representatives in eastern Libya voted to designate the Muslim Brotherhood a “terrorist group” and outlaw it, a move that fuelled partisan media narratives about the war on Tripoli.⁹⁵ Pro-Haftar media and commentators accused prominent figures in state institutions of being members of the Brotherhood and therefore “terrorists.”⁹⁶

In a study published in June 2019, PeaceLab reported that there had been a “clear uptick” in the use of the term “khawarij” – used by Haftar supporters and allied media since 2014 – on Libyan social media in early April, corresponding with the date Haftar launched his Tripoli offensive. It also noted a significant increase in the use of several other hate speech terms during the same period.⁹⁷

In July that year, the eastern authorities aligned with Haftar banned eleven TV stations they deemed hostile, accusing the channels of “justifying terrorism” and “threatening social peace.” RSF called on the ban to be lifted and asked the eastern authorities to explain the order it had issued to municipal councils not to cooperate with the channels.⁹⁸

An episode concerning an Italian blogger illustrated the echo chamber effect that often characterises the creation and evolution of partisan media narratives in Libya. The blogger, named Vanessa Tomassini, published articles on a little known Italian language website and came to the attention of Haftar’s camp when she claimed – without offering evidence – that members of the defunct Ansar al-Sharia group were fighting with GNA-aligned forces in Tripoli. She was subsequently embraced by pro-Haftar media and interviewed by Libyan TV channel 218 and also Sky News Arabia. Tomassini was invited to Benghazi to take part in what she described as a “political salon” organised by the foreign ministry of the unrecognised Haftar-aligned eastern authority to discuss “the role of the media in the fight against terrorism.”⁹⁹

In recent years, Haftar’s opponents have co-opted such language and now refer to their adversaries as “terrorists,” further undermining focus on designated terrorist groups. Ironically, one of the most outspoken anti-Haftar propagandists is Noman Benotman, a London-based former member of the LIFG who was at the time close to Haftar and publicly supported him after Haftar launched his operations in 2014. Benotman, who has a huge following on Twitter (with

over 400,000 followers, he is by far the most followed Libyan personality), regularly appears on Libya al-Ahrar TV channel, where he denounces Haftar and his allies as “terrorists.”

Conclusion

From 2014 to the present, Khalifa Haftar and his political and armed allies – who possess a formidable aligned media machine both domestic and regional – have branded their critics and opponents “terrorists” or “terrorist sympathisers.” The publication or broadcasting of such labelling has often led to the targeting of people and their property. This blanket use of the word “terrorist” has also resulted in the term losing meaning in the Libyan context. More recently, Haftar’s opponents have sought to co-opt such rhetoric, using the word “terrorist” to describe Haftar and his supporters, particularly since he sparked a new war with his failed attempt to capture Tripoli from the UN-recognised government in April 2019.

This has undermined attempts to conduct in-depth reporting on designated terrorist organisations present in Libya including IS and al-Qaeda linked groups. Journalists who have tried to report on these groups and the communities in which they emerged run the risk of not only being targeted by the organisations themselves – both IS and al-Qaeda linked groups have either kidnapped, killed or otherwise threatened reporters in Libya – but also being branded sympathisers if they seek nuance in their work. Journalists have been threatened or detained due to such perceptions, particularly in eastern Libya.

Subjective journalism that serves belligerents continues to dominate the Libyan media landscape, fomenting social tensions and even violence, as well as eroding the credibility of the media. This, in turn, makes the prospect of Libya ever developing a trusted, professional media sector seem remote in the long term.

Amid the noise of extreme partisanship that characterises most of Libya’s media, nuanced reporting on designated terrorist groups that could deepen understanding of how radicalisation happens and why in order to help prevent it in future is impossible.

94 Stanford Internet Observatory, “Libya: Presidential and Parliamentary Elections Scene Setter,” 02 October 2019. Available at: <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/libya-scene-setter>, accessed: 20 October 2020.

95 Al-Wasat Media, “Libya’s House of Representatives designates the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist group,” Al-Wasat, 14 May 2019. Available at: <http://en.alwasat.ly/news/libya/245023>, accessed: 16 October 2020.

96 This was often an accusation made against Sadiq al-Kabir, governor of the Central Bank of Libya based in Tripoli, and several of his colleagues.

97 PeaceTech Lab, June 2019.

98 The stations were Libya al Ahrar, Panorama, Tanasuh, Salam, al-Wasat Radio and Television, the Arraed Group, al-Nabaa, Febrayer TV, al-Watan TV, Libyan National Television and Arrasmia. See: Reporters Without Borders, “Eleven TV channels banned in eastern Libya,” 17 July 2019. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/news/libya-eleven-tv-channels-banned-eastern-libya>, accessed: 07 December 2020.

99 Tweet by Vanessa Tomassini, 17 May 2019. Accessed February, 2020. Twitter account no longer active.

Recommendations

- Professionalising Libya’s media sector will take years and little progress can be made while the civil conflict continues. In the meantime, measures to protect journalists should be encouraged, particularly regarding freedom of movement and independence of reporting.
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- As Libya’s internationally recognised authority, the GNA should be encouraged to demonstrate robust commitment to the principle of media freedom and help ensure media workers are protected from harassment and intimidation.
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- Efforts to tackle hate speech and incitement should include punitive measures against the worst offenders – whether individuals or the media outlets that host them – inside or outside Libya. This could take the form of “de-platforming” in the case of social media but also Libyan TV channels broadcasting from regional satellite networks.
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- Given the weaponising of Libya’s media and the way it has helped drive the country’s conflicts since 2014, questions related to the funding and ownership of media outlets by belligerents should be part of any dialogue process to end the current conflict.
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- Training programmes for the Libyan media sector should include modules on how to report on terrorism to encourage more nuanced reporting in future. These should comprise training in investigate journalism – including how to handle propaganda material, – as well as teaching media workers how to report on terrorist attacks in a sensitive and non-sensationalist way.

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