



Terrorist groups in Libya

Cahiers de la pensée mili-Terre n° 48

le Capitaine (TA) Thomas VARNIER

Published on 21/11/2017

Tactique générale

The situation in Libya remains as problematic as ever, with a country divided and controlled by militias. This leaves the field relatively open to the establishment of terrorist groups such as Daech or Al Mourabitoune... What are the security issues for regional stability posed by the establishment of these groups at a crossroads between Europe and Africa?

Since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya, divided, has been in a state of chaos. This chaos is conducive to the establishment of terrorist groups that use Libya to carry out their actions there or as a rear base for their actions in the Sahel-Saharan strip (BSS), or even, as some believe, for future actions in Europe. Some of these terrorist groups already existed under Gaddafi; however, the chaos following his fall allowed them to develop. They have a wide variety of objectives, strategies and means which are constantly evolving.

This makes their study very complex. As the situation is constantly evolving, we will limit our study to the Islamic State in Libya (EIL) and Al Mourabitoune, affiliated with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), because they are the most dangerous on the regional scene. What threats do these two groups pose to the stability of the country and the region? Although this threat appears serious, it appears that these groups, particularly Daech, have recently suffered setbacks and their level of dangerousness is tending to decline. It is therefore appropriate to look first at the Libyan context before looking at the specificities of these two groups and then at their prospects for development in the region.

The fall of Gaddafi in 2011 following Western intervention saw Libya gradually divide. Since then, militias, affiliated or not to the government, have each controlled their own territory and oppose the other militias in their desire to expand. The country was thus divided between the governments of Tripoli and Tobruk until 2016. However, faced with

the rise of terrorism, particularly from Daech who managed to establish himself in Libya between 2014 and 2015, the Westerners are pushing for the creation of a Government of National Unity (GUN). The latter, initially rejected by the parliaments of Tripoli and Tobruk, was eventually accepted and was instituted on 12 March 2016 under the presidency of Fayez el-Sarraj. With the support of the United Nations, the government moved to Tripoli and gradually began to establish its authority over the country. However, it is facing resistance, particularly that of General Haftar who, in September 2016, together with the Libyan National Army (ANL), conquered Libya's oil crescent, the country's economic lung. However, if there is one thing Libyans agree on, it is the fight against the EIL.

Indeed, EIL has succeeded in establishing itself in the cities of Derna and Sirte. This group was created by jihadists who were returning from Syria on April 4, 2014, under the name of the Islamic Youth Advisory Council. It pledged allegiance to the Islamic State on 3 October 2014 in a communiqué to be issued on 13 November 2014. He took advantage of the secession of elements of Ansar Al-Sharia to swell his ranks. It is organised into three wilayas corresponding to the Libyan provinces of Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and Fezzan. In fact, its elements were essentially stationed near Derna and Sirte. However, the EIL was pushed back from Derna in August 2015 and its elements retreated to Sirte. In January 2016, EIL elements launched attacks on the oil terminals at Ras Lanouf and Marsa El Brega. They were repulsed after damaging the infrastructure. In April 2016, General David M. Rodriguez, commander of the American forces in Africa,

reports that the EI has 4,000 to 6,000 men in Libya. Since then, the EI has undergone a major counter-offensive led by the GUN forces. Thus, in June 2016, the GUN forces gradually retook Sirte and have been pushing the last elements of the EIL since August 2016.

Al Mourabitoune, for its part, is a terrorist group born on 13 May 2015 from the merger of the "Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa" (MUJAO) and the "signatories by blood on 22 August 2013". On 13 May 2015, a branch pledged allegiance to the Islamic state. The other branch, led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, rallied AQIM on 4 December 2015 and became one of its katibas. In February 2016, the Malian intelligence services estimate that Al Mourabitoune has 200 fighters. Rémi Carayol, a journalist with Jeune Afrique, said that "other sources put the figure at 1,000. However, this group is particularly dangerous because it carries out activities in Mali and northern Niger such as the attacks in Ouagadougou in January 2016 and the suicide attack on Gao airport on 1 December 2016. This group uses Libya as a rear base for its fighters. This seems to be confirmed by the announcement by the American secret services of the death of Mokhtar Belmokhtar during a French strike in Libya in November 2016.

However, these two terrorist groups face a Libyan context that is very different from that of Syria and Iraq. Indeed, the major problem, particularly for EIL, is that of resources. Unlike the EI in Syria and Iraq, the EIL cannot use the oil windfall to finance itself because Libyan oil can only be exported by sea. However, it would be easily intercepted by the Western powers. Traffic by land is also not possible because Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt closely control their borders with Libya and would have to pass through areas under GUN or ANL control. This is why the EIL seeks instead to destroy the few remaining functioning oil infrastructures in order to destabilise the ruling power. Indeed, oil is the only resource that the government can use to regain control of the country, to pay civil servants and its forces... EIL can therefore only rely on the taxes it levies on the local population. This is not without opposition. It's a bit the same pattern for Al Mourabitoune, which is, however, smaller in terms of numbers. Most of its members are, however, linked to various forms of

trafficking, particularly drug trafficking.

The issue of recruitment is also central to these groups. When the EIL still had a fairly large staff, the leaders were mainly foreigners from Iraq or Syria. The latter were, however, regularly targeted by American strikes. For example, Abu Nabil al-Anbari, who came from Iraq to take over the leadership of the EIL, was killed near Derna on the night of 13-14 November 2015 by an American air strike. He was replaced by another Iraqi, Abu Ali al-Anbari, who arrived in Sirte in November 2015. In 2016, the United States kills him in an air raid. The fighters are a mixture of foreigners and Libyans. Following the setbacks suffered by the EIL, it seems that the last elements in Sirte are mainly foreigners, Moroccans, Tunisians, Egyptians, Sudanese... and a few Libyans who have nothing more to lose. Al Mourabitoune has also suffered many losses in recent years. But the group has always been smaller and tends to favour quality over quantity. Its fighters are therefore much better trained and indoctrinated than EIL soldiers. This explains why they are more dangerous and capable of acting more autonomously. However, their latest setbacks could reduce Al Mourabitoune's power of attraction over jihadists who would like to join their ranks.

In terms of prospects, it is reasonable to think that the threat posed by the EIL is in sharp decline and that its last members, if they manage to escape from Sirte, will instead seek to blend in with the population in order to disappear or to rebuild their forces. Their rise in power will surely be thwarted by the gradual regaining of power by the GUN or the ANL. Indeed, the latter have demonstrated their ability to fight against the EIL when the latter attacks the resource that sustains the whole country: oil. Al Mourabitoune will probably continue to use Libya as a rear base for its actions in Mali or Niger.

It is also possible that the threat, particularly from EIL, will resurface further south in the BSS. This would allow the various terrorist groups to have camps that are less threatened by government forces because the south is less controlled. This is already the case for Al Mourabitoune, but we could see the reappearance of EIL. However, this scenario seems implausible.

Finally, as for the threats to Europe, it is true that many militias take advantage of migrants to secure financial income by getting paid for their protection. This is not, however, a mode of action that has been observed for EIL or Al Mourabitoune, who are content with Islamic taxation or trafficking. It therefore seems very unlikely that these two groups will infiltrate elements to strike in Europe because EIL is in sufficient difficulty in Sirte and Al Mourabitoune has, for the time being, always remained confined to the BSS.

Thus, the latest GUN and ANL reconquests have largely undermined the EIL. Al Mourabitoune, for its part, has suffered losses from Western strikes and special forces actions. These two groups, although still dangerous (especially the EIL, which has nothing more to lose), have become less dangerous for regional stability. They have, however, already proved their ability to bounce back from their failures. Let us hope that the ongoing divisions in Libya will not allow them to rise from the ashes.

Saint-cyrien of the promotion "General de Galbert" (2002-2005). Captain (TA) Thomas VARNIER did his time as section leader at the 44th Signal Regiment before commanding the BRB7 of the 1st Artillery Regiment. During this first part of his career, he was deployed twice in Afghanistan and once in Lebanon. He then served at the National Targeting Centre (CNC) as an analyst before being chosen to follow a course in Arabic at INALCO.

Title : le Capitaine (TA) Thomas VARNIER

Author (s) : le Capitaine (TA) Thomas VARNIER

Release date 21/11/2017