

Excerpt from an analytical profile on Ansar al-Sharia

Following the death of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, the National Transitional Council declared Libya “liberated” and began the process of developing a pluralistic, democratic state.¹ The National Transitional Council hosted the first free national election Libya had seen in four decades. This allowed Libyan citizens to participate in building a new government from scratch.² The National Transitional Council handed power to the General National Congress, the elected parliament. However, Libya’s Islamists did not win as many seats in the parliament as they expected. In Egypt and Tunisia, the Islamists gained a majority in the parliamentary elections following the “Arab Spring.”³ This sparked tensions between the nationalists and Islamists in Libya. “Rather than accept the result, the Islamist leaders accused the new parliament of being dominated by supporters of the former dictator, declared it unconstitutional and battled the nationalist militia holding Tripoli for control of the capital.”⁴ As a result of the increasing disputes and fighting between rival militias, the Libyan central government collapsed in 2014.⁵ In response, the Islamist militias joined together to form Libya Dawn, seized the airport from the Libyan nationalists, and subsequently took Tripoli from the elected government. The elected Libyan government then moved to Tobruk in the east.⁴

Between these two warring factions sits Ansar al-Sharia (ASL) in Benghazi. Former anti-Gaddafi rebels joined together from several militias in eastern Libya to create ASL in June 2012 with the hopes of establishing an authoritative, theological state based on Sharia law.⁶

¹ Arab uprising: Country by country, 2013

² Kirkpatrick, 2012

³ El-Tablawy, 2012

⁴ Stephen, 2014

⁵ Libya country profile, 2015

⁶ Sharia law: Islamic legal system based on the Quran and the Sunnah

Mohammad al-Zahawi founded and led ASL until his death January 2015. Abu Khalid al-Madani succeeded Zahawi as leader of ASL.⁷ Madani will likely continue ASL's agenda of fighting rival militias and the nationalist government with a stated goal of reforming Libya and establishing an Islamic state. Members of ASL came from groups including the Abu Obayda bin al-Jarah Brigade, the Malik Brigade and the February 17 Brigade.⁸ The majority of foreign fighters within ASL come from the surrounding area including Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Sudan and Morocco.⁹

During its infancy, ASL largely looked up to Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST). AST plans to establish an Islamic state, but understands that outreach and social services are necessary to first establish and then build an Islamic society. ASL and its sister organizations in Tunisia and Egypt focus on service to the community instead of solely jihad.¹⁰ Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri encouraged jihadi groups to exploit the fresh starts given to countries like Egypt, Tunisia and Libya to provide *dawa* (service) and spread the word of Islam. Well-respected Sunni jihadi ideologue, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, echoed a similar sentiment. In his book, *Waqafat ma' Thamrat al-Jihad (Stances on the Fruit of Jihad)*, Maqdisi defines the difference between *qital al-nikayya* (fighting to hurt or damage the enemy) and *qital al-tamkin* (fighting to consolidate one's power). Maqdisi argues that fighting to hurt or damage the enemy will only lead to short-term victories. Fighting to consolidate one's power, however, will provide a basis on which an Islamic state can be formed. Based on the teachings of Zawahiri and Maqdisi, ASL and its sister organizations focus their attention more heavily on *dawa* than jihad or *hisbah*.⁹

⁷ Joscelyn, 2015

⁸ Irshaid, 2014

⁹ Zelin, 2015

¹⁰ Jihad: military action with the objective to expand Islam or defend it

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ASL primarily focuses on its local *dawa* with activities like anti-drug campaigns, blood drives, food drives, housing projects, school cleanings, garbage removal and bridge repairs. ASL opened a number of facilities for women and children including a medical clinic, an emergency room, an Islamic center for women and a religious school. ASL's practices its *dawa* outside of Libya's borders too. ASL began launching *dawa* campaigns in other Middle Eastern countries in November 2012 with aid packages to Syria and Gaza. ASL responded to the flooding in Sudan in August 2013 with two shipments, the first containing five tons of medicine, twelve tons of grains and legumes, and eight tons of children's milk. The second shipment consisted of twenty-four tons of clothing and one and a half tons of floor carpets for mosques. ASL ensured that each of these items was stamped with the ASL logo. In late January 2014, ASL sent beef, flour and electric generators to Syria. That same month, ASL's contacts in Gaza distributed cash-filled envelopes to homes damaged by Israeli military action. After its primary focus on *dawa*, ASL concentrates on *hisbah*, condemning what it finds to be wrong according to Islam. In the past, ASL destroyed Sufi shrines and places of worship. It stormed the European School in Benghazi and confiscated books on the human body because of the "pornographic" nature of images contained within it. Sources in Libya suspect ASL assassinated a number of security and government officials as well as civil society activists.⁹ These violent actions comprise a small fraction of what ASL does within Benghazi.

While performing its service, ASL hands out pamphlets encouraging recruitment and describing ASL's ideology. First, ASL places an immense emphasis on the *tawhid* of God, or pure monotheism. Muslims must abide by the literal authority of God; otherwise, he or she is branded a *kafir* (unbeliever). This includes anyone calling for democracy or secularism. According to this standard, the citizens of Libya elected a group of *kafireen* (unbelievers) to the

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Libyan parliament. Lastly, ASL seeks to purge the *Ummah* (Islamic community) from *kufr* (infidelity) and respond with military jihad to bring about *tawhid* if necessary.⁹

ASL strictly opposes the idea of democracy based on what it believes to be its incompatibility with Islam. ASL claims democracy and Islam cannot coexist because democracy is based on the “rule of the people” while *shura* (Islamic consultation) is based on the “rule of God.” It also claims democracy enforces man-made laws that violate Islamic law while *shura* uses judicial *ijtihad* (reasoning) to individually evaluate cases according to Islamic teachings. ASL also believes people rule the democratic system while God rules the *shura*.⁹ According to ASL, an Islamic democratic party is an oxymoron; democracy and Islam cannot operate in the same legal or political framework.

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