

# Ansar al-Shariah (Libya)

## AT A GLANCE

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## HOW TO CITE

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## SUMMARY

**Formed:** 2012

**Disbanded:** May 2017

**First Attack:** August 25, 2012: ASL fighters destroyed ancient Sufi shrines throughout Libya (unknown casualties).<sup>1</sup>

**Last Attack:** January 15, 2017: BRSC fighters shot down a fighter jet from Operation Destiny over Benghazi (unknown casualties).<sup>2</sup>

## OVERVIEW

Ansar al-Shariah in Libya (ASL) is a Salafist Islamist militant group that formed in the aftermath of the February 2011 Libyan uprising against Muammar el-Qaddafi. ASL emerged from the merger of the Ansar al-Shariah Brigade in Benghazi (ASB) and Ansar al-Shariah Derna (ASD). The group aimed to establish Shariah law in Libya according to its own interpretation of Islam and opposed democracy. ASL fought the Libyan government and its armed forces while seeking popular support from Libyan communities through extensive charitable actions. In 2013, ASL expanded its operations, effectively occupying territory in Benghazi, Derna, Sirte and Ajdabiya. The group helped to form two umbrella organizations—the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC) and the Mujahideen Shura Council of Derna (MSCD)—in an effort to combat Libyan Army General Hifter and Islamic State forces in Libya. ASL lost most of its territory through clashes with the Libyan National Army (LNA), from May 2014, under Operation Dignity. In May 2017, ASL officially announced its dissolution due to heavy losses suffered against the LNA.

## **NARRATIVE SUMMARY**

Ansar al-Shariah in Libya (ASL) was an Islamist group that formed when two smaller militant groups, Ansar al-Shariah in Benghazi (ASB) and Ansar al-Shariah in Derna (ASD), each only a couple months old themselves, merged in the aftermath of the February 2011 Libyan uprising against Muammar el-Qaddafi. Despite their union, the groups operated somewhat separately beneath the label Ansar al-Shariah and in 2014, the U.S. government listed them separately as designated terrorist organizations.<sup>3</sup> ASL aimed to implement a strict interpretation of Shariah law in Libya and opposed democracy.<sup>4</sup> The group fought the Libyan government and its armed forces, and at the same time sought to gain popular support through extensive charitable actions in Libyan communities.<sup>5</sup> Although ASL publicly denied a relationship with Al Qaeda (AQ), the group released statements in support of AQ and its leaders and allegedly acted as an AQ ally.<sup>6</sup>

ASL first gained notoriety after the U.S. and the international community implicated the group in the September 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, which resulted in the death of U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens, Information Officer Sean Smith, and two CIA agents. Although ASL officially denied that it was involved, thousands of Libyans peacefully demonstrated in Benghazi against the group's violence; some civilians stormed ASB headquarters and forced the militants out of the city.<sup>7</sup>

In the aftermath of the attack, ASD forces within ASL mostly disbanded, and ASB forces within ASL changed their name from Ansar al-Shariah to Ansar al-Shariah in Libya (ASL) in an effort to build a more national brand and rebuild trust with Libyan communities. The group publicly denounced violence, promoted itself as a charitable public service organization, and launched a *dawa* campaign, under which it provided a wide range of social services such as educational programs and health services to the citizens of Benghazi.<sup>8</sup> ASL also conducted *dawa* abroad through small campaigns like the 2012 delivery of aid packages to Syria and Gaza and the provision of food aid to Sudan after major flooding in the summer of 2013.<sup>9</sup> Many experts questioned ASL's peaceful intentions during this time, as the group also increased its interactions with other jihadist groups and trained militants from Syria, Iraq, and Mali. ASL resumed violent attacks against the Libyan military shortly after.<sup>10</sup>

In 2013, ASL expanded its militant operations in Benghazi to Derna, Sirte and Ajdabiya, effectively occupying the area.<sup>11</sup> In May 2014, Libyan Army General Khalifa Hifter launched Operation Dignity to fight against Libya's Islamist militant groups, eroding ASL's control over most of its territory. ASL was also weakened by conflict with the fast-growing Libyan branch of the Islamic State (IS), which took over ASL strongholds in Derna and Sirte. In 2014 and 2015, ASL leaders Abu Abdullah al Libi and Abu Sufyan bin Qumu defected to IS, allegedly taking cadres of fighters with them.<sup>12</sup>

After the launch of Operation Dignity, ASL aimed to regain its foothold in Libya by dramatically reducing its *dawa* operations while increasing its attacks. In July 2014, after violent clashes with the Libyan army, ASL announced that it had taken over Benghazi. That summer, the group united a number of Islamist militant groups into a new umbrella

organization, Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC), in order to combat General Hifter and act on behalf of the Benghazi people while hiding the group's AQ affiliation.<sup>13</sup> The BRSC claimed responsibility for a number of suicide bombings in early October 2014, which targeted and killed dozens of Libyan soldiers at the Benina International Airport and a military checkpoint.<sup>14</sup> ASL forces in Derna also helped form the Mujahideen Shura Council of Derna (MSCD) in December 2014, which opposes Libyan government forces and IS allies.<sup>15</sup>

ASL suffered a significant blow when, in January 2015, Emir Mohammad al-Zahawi died from wounds from an attack by Libyan pro-government forces.<sup>16</sup> Following Zahawi's death, ASL began losing more members to the IS's Libyan branch. Moreover, General Hifter's forces retook Benghazi's port area, thought to be ASL's last major stronghold in the city, in February 2015.<sup>17</sup> Due to heavy losses against Hifter's National Libyan Army, ASL announced its dissolution in May 2017. In a public statement, the group urged other militants in Benghazi to unite and continue to fight against Hifter's forces.<sup>18</sup>

## ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

### A. LEADERSHIP

**Mohammad al-Zahawi** (February 2012 to January 2015): Zahawi was the leader of ASB and served as leader of ASL from the group's formation until his death due to wounds from an attack by Libyan pro-government forces.<sup>19</sup>

**Abu Sufyan bin Qumu** (2012 to Summer 2014): Qumu founded ASD in 2012; within ASL, Qumu led the group's Derna branch.<sup>20</sup> He was once a driver for Osama bin Laden and fought alongside AQ and the Taliban in Afghanistan. In the summer of 2014, Qumu defected to join the IS.<sup>21</sup> He is a former inmate of Guantanamo Bay.

**Ahmed Abu Khattala** (Unknown to June 26, 2014): Khattala was accused by the U.S. government of orchestrating the 2012 attacks on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi. He reportedly founded the Abu Ubaidah bin Jarrah rebel brigade after Qaddafi's fall and served as a leader in ASB.<sup>22</sup> Khattala was captured in June 2014 and brought to the U.S. to face trial; he was indicted for providing material support and resources to terrorists.<sup>23</sup>

**Sheikh Faiz Attiya** (Unknown to May 2017): Attiya lead ASL's dawa campaign. He played a major role in ASL's delivery of aid to Sudan after flooding in 2013.<sup>24</sup>

**Abu Khalid al Madani** (June 18, 2015 to May 2017): Madani became emir of ASL six months after Zahawi died. In January 2015, Madani delivered Zahawi's eulogy.<sup>25</sup>

### B. NAME CHANGES

The group reportedly changed its name from Ansar al-Shariah to Ansar al-Shariah in Libya (ASL) in October 2012 to differentiate itself from Ansar al-Shariah in Tunisia, as well as emphasize its national ambitions.<sup>26</sup>

### **C. SIZE ESTIMATES**

- September 2012: 200 (NY Times)<sup>27</sup>
- September 2012: 250 (Foreign Policy)<sup>28</sup>
- September 2012: 300 – 5,000 fighters (AP)<sup>29</sup>

### **D. RESOURCES**

ASL was partially funded by donations from Libyan expatriates for its dawa campaign. In 2013 and 2014, ASL briefly received funds from the General National Congress (GNC), the interim Libyan government, in exchange for security services and assistance to stop drug trafficking. ASL was reportedly linked financially to AST and has sold AST weapons.<sup>30</sup>

### **E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS**

**Disclaimer:** This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

ASL was based in Benghazi, Libya, in the Quwarshah district and carried out attacks and dawa operations in Benghazi, Derna, Sirte and Ajdabiya.<sup>31</sup> ASL also conducted dawa campaigns outside of Libya, including charity campaigns in Gaza, Syria, and Sudan.<sup>32</sup>

## **STRATEGY**

### **A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS**

ASL was a Sunni Islamist organization. It sought a strict implementation of Shariah law in Libya and did not tolerate other interpretations of Islam.<sup>33</sup> ASL opposed the democratic system and considered it to be immoral as it gives the power to make laws to man, when it belongs with God alone.<sup>34</sup> ASL aimed to gain the trust and respect of Libyan communities through its dawa campaigns.<sup>35</sup>

### **B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES**

There are no known political activities for this organization.

### **C. TARGETS AND TACTICS**

Despite being implicated in a number of attacks by the Libyan government and press, ASL rarely claimed responsibility for attacks that harmed civilians. After Libyans protested ASL's alleged role in the attack on the American consulate in Benghazi, ASL denied involvement and began downplaying its militancy while promoting its charitable activities (dawa) to win public support.<sup>36</sup> The group has long made use of its official media hub, the al-Raya Media Productions Foundation, to highlight its community service and commitment to defending Islam.<sup>37</sup>

After General Khalifa Hifter declared war on the Islamist militias in Libya through "Operation Dignity," ASL focused on targeting the Libyan military as part of the umbrella organization, the BRSC.<sup>38</sup>

ASL used suicide bombs, cars laden with explosives, and small arms to target the Libyan government, its forces, and Sufi shrines.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, ASL ran a series of training camps to train its fighters and those from other militant organizations. These Libya-based camps trained Syrian rebel groups, as well as militants in the AMB and the Sons of the Islamic Sahara Movement for Justice for the 2013 attack on the In Amenas gas complex.<sup>40</sup> Although ASL's attacks have largely occurred inside Libya, it has attacked western targets in the country and its training camps have supported militants carrying out international attacks.<sup>41</sup>

## MAJOR ATTACKS

**Disclaimer:** These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

**August 25, 2012:** ASL fighters destroyed ancient Sufi shrines throughout Libya (unknown casualties).<sup>42</sup>

**September 11, 2012:** ASL allegedly participated in the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, that resulted in the death of Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans, though it repeatedly denied its involvement in the attack (4 killed, 10 wounded).<sup>43</sup>

**June 2, 2014:** ASL militants launched a counterattack against Libyan "Operation Dignity" forces, leading to the highest number of casualties since the start of the operation (21 killed, 112 wounded).<sup>44</sup>

**July 30, 2014:** ASL took over a Libyan military base and seized its weapons. After the attack, ASL announced that it had taken all of Benghazi (65+ killed, 29+ wounded).<sup>45</sup>

**October 2, 2014:** ASL fighters, in coordination with the BRSC, carried out a series of suicide bombings targeting the Libyan military at checkpoints and at the Benina airport (49 killed, 52+ wounded).<sup>46</sup>

**February 8, 2016:** February 8, 2016: ASL fighters shot down a Libyan jet over Derna using anti-aircraft guns (unknown casualties).<sup>47</sup>

**January 15, 2017:** BRSC fighters shot down a Libyan fighter jet from "Operation Dignity" over Benghazi (unknown casualties).<sup>48</sup>

## INTERACTIONS

### A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

- U.S. State Department Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO): January 13, 2014 to Present (lists ASB and ASD separately).<sup>49</sup>

- UNSC ISIL (Da'esh) & Al-Qaida Sanctions List: November 19, 2014 to Present (lists ASB and ASD separately).<sup>50</sup>
- Turkey Designated Terrorist Organizations: November 2014 to Present.<sup>51</sup>
- United Arab Emirates Cabinet Designated Terrorist Organization: November 2014 to Present.<sup>52</sup>
- United Kingdom Home Office Proscribed Terrorist Organization: November 2014 to Present (lists ASB and ASD separately).<sup>53</sup>
- New Zealand: November 19, 2014 to Present (lists ASB and ASD separately).<sup>54</sup>

## **B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS**

After the September 2012 attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi, ASL faced widespread backlash from the Libyan community for its purported participation in the attack. An estimated 30,000 Libyans stormed ASL militia headquarters to peacefully demonstrate against the group's violence in a civilian-led protest.<sup>55</sup> In the aftermath of the protests, ASL rebranded itself and launched a *dawa* campaign, through which it began to provide a wide range of social services to the citizens of Benghazi.<sup>56</sup> These services ranged from educational programs and tribal dispute mediation to street cleaning, garbage collection, security patrols and traffic regulation. ASL undertook infrastructure construction projects, distributed free meat on Muslim holidays, and established a women's cultural center and a medical clinic.<sup>57</sup>

After major flooding in Sudan in the summer of 2013, ASL sent personnel and 12 tons of grains and legumes, eight tons of milk, 24 tons of clothing, and 1.5 tons of floor carpeting for mosques to the affected areas. The group carried out similar aid deliveries in Syria and Gaza in January 2014.<sup>58</sup>

Despite its *dawa* operations and public goods provision, ASL faced opposition from Libyan civilians, many of whom were weary of militias and violence after the civil war that ousted Qaddafi.<sup>59</sup>

## **C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS**

ASL formed in 2012 when the Ansar al-Shariah Brigade in Benghazi (ASB) and Ansar al-Shariah in Derna (ASD), two groups that emerged in the security vacuum following the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi's government, began operating together and publishing propaganda under one brand.<sup>60</sup> ASB and ASD consolidated under the ASL label following the publication of an official communique in June 2012 and the September 2012 attack on the US embassy in Benghazi. Despite their union, the groups operated somewhat independently underneath the ASL label.<sup>61</sup>

Like many militant groups operating in Libya, ASL's senior leadership has ties to Al Qaeda (AQ). ASL leader Abu Sufyan bin Qumu fought alongside AQ in Afghanistan and reportedly was a driver for Osama bin Laden.<sup>62</sup> ASL never officially pledged allegiance to AQ, but the group released statements in support of the group and its leaders. ASL operates a series of training camps across Libya to train its fighters, as well as those of other militant organizations, such as Jabhat Fatah al Sham, AQ's Syria branch, and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).<sup>63</sup> ASL's camps additionally trained militants

from the AQIM splinter group, the Al Mulathameen Battalion (AMB), for the attack on the In Amenas gas complex in January 2013.<sup>64</sup> According to French sources, AQIM fighters met with ASL in southern Libya, and AQIM consistently shares posts by ASL accounts on Twitter. ASL also coordinated attacks with Al Mourabitoun.<sup>65</sup>

Although the groups are not affiliates, ASL and Ansar al-Shariah in Tunisia (AST) reportedly share some operational, financial, and logistical links. ASL allegedly has a support network among AST members and has sold weapons to AST.<sup>66</sup>

IS has reportedly sought to recruit ASL as an affiliate since its rise in Libya in 2014. In July 2014, IS militants made social media posts persuading ASL to pledge allegiance to IS.<sup>67</sup> In 2014 and 2015, several ASL leaders including Abu Abdullah al Libi and Abu Sufyan bin Qumu, defected to IS, allegedly taking cadres of fighters with them.<sup>68</sup> IS took over large tracts of territory controlled by ASL while fighting Libyan military forces in 2014. In April 2016, ASL, under the Mujahideen Shura Council of Derna, helped to push IS out of Derna.

ASL helped form two umbrella groups, which focused on eliminating the Libyan government. In July 2014, ASL led Benghazi Islamist militant groups in forming the Benghazi Revolutionary Shura Council (BRSC), an alliance which claims to fight General Hifter's forces on behalf of the people of Benghazi but also serves to mask the group's AQ affiliation. ASL forces in Derna also helped to form the Mujahideen Shura Council of Derna (MSCD), an umbrella organization which opposes the Libyan National Army and affiliates of IS.<sup>69</sup>

ASL was reputedly also tied to the Benghazi Defense Brigades (BDB), from June 2016 until their dissolution in June 2017. The BDB formed to support the BRSC, defend Benghazi against the Libyan National Army and the IS, and support the new Government of National Accord in Libya.<sup>70</sup>

#### **D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES**

ASL was partially funded in 2013 and 2014 by the General National Congress (GNC), which was dominated by revolutionaries from Misrata and different Islamist parties, in exchange for security services and assistance in stopping drug traffickings.<sup>71</sup> GNC's Islamist bloc dissolved in May 2014, when the LNA stormed the parliament building and forced the GNC to call new elections.

#### **MAPS**

- North Africa

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