

Islamic State (ISIS) sympathizers are ramping up their calls on social media for would-be western jihadis to capitalise on the security vacuum in Libya and join the terror group's three Wilayats (provinces) in the country as the radical Islamists attempt to build their North African power base a half-day's sail from Europe's shores, experts say.

The group was ousted from the eastern Libyan city of Derna in June, Reuters reported, but it has expanded its territorial control in other areas of the country, establishing a presence in the central city of Sirte, the hometown of deposed Libyan dictator Muammar Gadhafi, and a base just outside of the western city of Sabratha, near the capital, Tripoli.

Coalition airstrikes on Daesh/ ISIS positions in Syria and tougher border security measures in Turkey appear to be leading online ISIS supporters, based on their social media activity, to seek to strengthen their North African front and expand the group's self-proclaimed Islamic caliphate elsewhere.

One English-speaking ISIS sympathiser, who claims to be in Libya and also tweets in Ethiopia's official language of Amharic, wrote last recently that anyone who could not enter Syria or Iraq should travel to Libya to join the group.

"We made hijrah [migration] to IS Libya thru d sahara at the back of Toyota pickups but we'll invade Rome with boats on the mediterranean [sic]," the radical ISIS supporter tweeted. "If you can't [migrate] to Dawlatul Islam [ISIS] in sham and iraq, u can hijrah to dawlatul islam [ISIS] in libya & afrika."

Many tweets with a similar message have appeared in recent months. Another user tweeted in August: "IS Libya needs qualified Muslims in engineering, medicine, media, shariah etc...Please make [migration] to your khilafa [caliphate]..."

This week, an ISIS sympathiser continued this trend, asking radicals attempting to reach Syria to fight for the group in more accessible areas such as Libya but also the group's Khorasan cell in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. "Point is not "don't come" but 2 consider making [migration] 2 other [provinces] which is easier & safer. #Libya #Khorasan," the user wrote.

The locations and nationalities of the social media users could not be independently verified.

Western female jihadis, who claim to be based in Libya, are also issuing recruitment calls for other radicals to make the journey to the country, according to U.K.-based think tank the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, as first reported in The Guardian.

Melanie Smith, research associate at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and expert on female jihadis, told Newsweek by phone that three female jihadis being monitored by the think tank were attempting to lure Muslims to Libya for months before their social media accounts went down in August.

"We went through the same process to verify them that we do with women that go to Syria and Iraq, which is cross-referencing things that they are saying about battle on the ground, whether they post any pictures, how they describe themselves," she says. "We then started to notice that this was a thing and that people were going to Libya. This represents a new trend for us."

One of the female jihadis, known as Umm [sister] Unknown, tweeted in June: "Come to Libya. [Migration] is not only to Shaam [Syria] now. Libya needs you too." According to The Guardian, another female jihadi, Umm Mus'ab, tweeted to her followers: "Come to the land where no man will ever see your face."

Their locations within Libya are unknown but Smith adds that there was "a lot of [social media] conversation around Sirte, which is where Islamic State's stronghold really is at the moment."

It remains unclear how many ISIS sympathisers, if any, have been influenced by the Twitter posts to make the journey to Libya but it is clear that the country is easily accessible for North African and European jihadists as there is no international force operating there, says Olivier Guitta, managing director at London-based security and political risk consultancy GlobalStrat.

"Libya is a much bigger market for Western recruits than Syria because if you look at the

background of Western Muslims being from North Africa, Libya is right there," he told Newsweek by phone. "If you tell a Moroccan or an Algerian would you rather go to Syria or Libya? It's simple, it will be Libya."

"If they get to Tunisia, they can just cross the border, it is very, very easy. At the same time, it would make sense for them to use a failed state where no western forces are and no Russians," Guitta adds. "It's like Syria three or four years ago except you have no Assad. You have two governments [in Tripoli and Tobruk] that are powerless."

ISIS has made previous recruitment attempts in Libya, with the country's foreign minister Mohammed al-Dairi saying that 5,000 foreign fighters had flocked to the North African state in March. The country has descended into a lawless state on the Mediterranean following the ousting of Gadhafi at the height of the Arab Spring in October 2011.

Before ISIS announced an official presence in the country in October 2014, figures released by the U.K.-based International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) in January revealed that radicals from neighbouring Tunisia, which shares a porous border with Libya, constituted the highest group of nationals to join extremist groups in Iraq and Syria since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in March 2011.

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