

FOREIGN REPORTS INC.

818 18TH Street NW, Suite 1050
Washington, D.C. 20006

Tel: 202-785-4574

Fax: 202-785-5370

BULLETIN

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THE ISIS RAMPAGE IN LIBYA

A week of bloody ISIS attacks on Libya's oil industry indicates that the militants have no interest in taking over oil fields, as they did in Iraq and Syria: they are content with destroying equipment, slaughtering guards and capturing foreigners.

The March 7 attack on the Ghani field, in the Sirte basin, capped off a week of raids on the nearby Mabrook, Bahi and Dahra fields, two of which were attacked twice before in February. With no end in sight to the rampage and rival governments incapable of coming to the rescue, NOC declared force majeure for 11 fields on March 4. Another oil official told *Reuters* today that two more fields were shut to be safe.

Estimates vary but current oil production in Libya is said to be in the range of 250,000-500,000 b/d; official estimates are on the high side. The Sarir field, which produced 185,000 b/d until a few weeks ago, is reportedly pumping at that volume again now that pipeline repairs are complete, power is back, and bad weather has passed. In spite of today's chaos, oil is being exported from the Zueitina, Marsa al-Hariga and offshore terminals.

Seek and Destroy

In each case this month, ISIS has systematically attacked control rooms and equipment when it overran facilities. "The attackers don't want to control the oil fields, that's not their aim--it seems their aim is to burn, destroy and steal whatever they can," army spokesman Ahmed al-Mesmari told the BBC yesterday.

The raid on Ghani late last week killed at least seven guards. Eight or more foreign workers were captured, raising the total of ISIS-held hostages to at least 11. Governments in Austria, Bangladesh, Ghana, the Philippines and the Czech Republic fear the worst. ISIS has not claimed the attacks nor has it posted pictures of captives on social media, as it did before killing 21 Egyptian Christians last month. ISIS in Libya has limited resources. It may be holding out for ransoms.

Neither side in Libya's civil war is massing the forces required to flush ISIS from its strongholds in Sirte and Derna. Meanwhile, the U.S., EU and UN are waiting for a national unity government to be formed before they offer any real support.

Attacks Launched from Sirte

Recent attacks have all been launched from Muammar Qaddafi's hometown of Sirte, a coastal city of 120,000 about 400 km east of Tripoli. (The cluster of fields which have been attacked so far are only about 175 km to the southeast of Sirte.) ISIS in Sirte recently split from the local branch of Ansar al-Shariah, another terrorist group bent on imposing medieval law and order. The core members of ISIS in Sirte hail from Misrata.

ISIS now has three affiliates inside Libya. The Sirte branch exploded onto the scene on February 15, when ISIS's official media outlet released a glossy video showing its fighters executing 21 Egyptians. Before that, ISIS paraded through Sirte and took over government offices, a university, local radio stations, and another nearby town.

No Action Against ISIS

Hours after the gruesome video was released, Egypt retaliated by bombing ISIS targets in the eastern city of Derna. On the same day and in response to international outrage, the Islamist-revolutionary coalition in Tripoli--known as Dawn--dispatched forces to Sirte, where the video was actually shot. All the while, top Dawn officials like Omar al-Hassi denied that ISIS was active in Libya. They claimed the video was fake or that the perpetrators were Qaddafi loyalists.

Forces deployed by Dawn appear to be far fewer than originally claimed and according to *The New York Times* they have not dared to enter the city. Instead, they have taken control of Gardabya airport to the south, but kept their distance from ISIS. Militants slip in and out of the city at will, while Dignity's air force targets Dawn positions from the air.

Those guards defending remote facilities are underequipped, few in number and often lack experience under fire. Many are merely collecting a paycheck. So far reinforcements have not directly engaged ISIS because they have arrived too late.

Morocco Talks Raise Hopes

Three days of UN talks held in Morocco last week were substantive. Delegations from both sides--representing Dawn's imposed parliament and the elected parliament backed by Dignity--have since returned home to present options for a national unity government to their constituents.

Since UN talks started in September, serious questions have been raised about whether these delegations could ever rein in militias or get the army to commit to a ceasefire. Even if a ceasefire is reached and a unity government takes office, Libya will still lack a true national army--the kind that could take the fight to ISIS. The U.S. and its European allies tried to build one in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution. They failed miserably and ultimately gave up.