

Fleeing Libya's Sirte: 'Islamic State Arrived, and the End of Our Lives Began'

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More than 90,000 people have fled Sirte and the clutches of IS. Many left with nothing other than the stories of desperate conditions inside the city

At the back of a carpet shop in Tripoli Street, one of the main roads through Misrata, citizens collect essential items for refugees. There are shoes, clothes, mattresses, books and games for children and even food baskets for young couples who cannot afford a wedding lunch.

The donations will be shared among the tens of thousands of civilians who have fled Sirte and the clutches of the Islamic State group. The UN says [more than 90,000](#) have left – two thirds of the city's population – including 35,000 in the two months since the start of a Libyan offensive to take back the city. Among them are 3,000 children under the age of three.

Misrata, Beni Walid and Tarhouna have taken in the vast majority, many of whom arrived with nothing other than the clothes on their backs and stories of their break for freedom from desperate conditions inside the city.

Fatima is in line at the carpet shop with her 13-year-old daughter Aisha, one of her five children. Until a few months ago they lived in Sirte.

"My husband is blind and has a heart problem," Fatima told Middle East Eye. "When we were in Sirte we lived with his family, sharing the food and expenses, and as long as I could work my salary was enough to guarantee children what they needed."

Then Islamic State arrived, and the end of our lives began. They took possession of all aspects of our lives.

Holding a picture of her eldest son, Ali, 15, Fatima said: "They wanted to recruit our children. We knew there were spies everywhere who controlled the boys who went to their lessons. Young people were forced to listen to their sermons."

The situation became desperate for Fatima as food and medicine began to run out.

At that point my husband and I began to think of escape. We were afraid of being stopped at a checkpoint and kidnapped, as we knew it was happening to many others.

But one night we took courage and we fled. I did not want my son to be

corrupted by their ideology, but at the same time I was afraid they would kill him. For this, we fled.

'I tried to resist till the end'

Another refugee, Ibrahim, met with MEE in a hotel in Misrata. He asked to remain anonymous for fear IS would kill his brother, whom they abducted and forced to fight.

They took him from our home, at night, after having ransacked everything. The same thing happened to many other young people.

They forced them to train, we know that around Sirte there are several training camps and we saw weapons arriving all the time during these months.

"I tried to resist till the end. I did not want to leave Sirte without my brother, but when the bombing started I convinced my mother to flee," he said.

Ibrahim recounted the punishing conditions inside Sirte after IS arrived in 2014, and the reign of terror exacted on its population.

They controlled everything: the port, the air base, the radio station, they stopped all communication with the outside, they closed banks. They taxed my shop, my family was starving.

They forced citizens to attend public executions. Many people were beheaded and hanged on a scaffold on the roundabout in Zafran.

I was forced to attend public executions seven times... they passed in the street with loudspeakers threatening retaliation for those who did not attend.

They killed innocent people, accusing them of witchcraft, blasphemy, or spying.

I can never forget the faces of my fellow citizens killed. I will never forget the pain of their families and the fear of all of us.



'The soldiers were mainly foreigners. Judges were Nigerian'

The IS fighters were mostly foreign, he said.

The largest group was Tunisian, and there were soldiers from Yemen, Chad, Nigeria. Their judges were mostly Nigerians. The leaders were not Libyans - they were mostly Syrians and Iraqis.

They were carrying lots of currencies; there were Libyan dinars but also euro and so many dollars.

There was a prison in a school, in the Ribat area, and another at the central bank, we were all terrified of their Islamic police, terrified of ending up on their lists.

A friend of mine was sentenced to be publicly flogged because the Islamic police claimed to have seen him smoking in public.

He said he hated fleeing, but there was no alternative.

And I pray for the civilians left in Sirte. Because I fear that they are used as human shields.

Many people ask me why I had not run away before. I answer: because Sirte is my home, because I wanted my brother back, because I was hoping that someone might save us.

Forces loyal to the Libyan unity government, based in Tripoli, have been inching towards Sirte for two months. Reports from the front lines suggest British and American forces are directing the Libyan campaign, but progress is slow.

And the many thousands who have fled death must find a new way to live until their city is liberated.

“Now I’m here in Misrata and I pray every morning to find a job to feed my mother,” Ibrahim said.

Fatima is also struggling. “We feel deeply alone,” she said. “I have three jobs to pay the rent of the house we found, but if I pay the rent little or nothing remains to buy food.

I had to ask Aisha to start working with me. I do not want her to do menial work too. I clean houses and ask her just to cook.

 Libyan forces launched a counter-offensive around Sirte two months ago (AFP)

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