

The LIFG's Current Role in the Global Jihad

By Alison Pargeter

WITH INCREASING NUMBERS of suicide attacks in Algeria, the uncovering of militant cells in Morocco and the recent kidnappings of two Austrian tourists in Tunisia, North Africa appears to be once again becoming a hotspot of Islamist militancy. Although the Islamist movement in Libya was deemed to have been all but eliminated by the Mu`ammar Qadhafi regime at the end of the 1990s, concerns are now mounting that this North African state will not be able to escape the new wave of violence and militancy that is blighting the region. These fears were further compounded in November 2007 when al-Qa`ida ideologue Ayman al-Zawahiri and Libyan militant Abu Laith al-Libi announced that the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) was joining al-Qa`ida. It appeared that this movement, known for its nationalism and its fierce independence, as well as its rejection of Usama bin Ladin, had at last joined the al-Qa`ida network, linking Libya into what many observers have described as al-Qa`ida's North African front.

Examining the al-Qa`ida-LIFG Relationship

As with most things Libyan, however, this new relationship with al-Qa`ida was not quite what it seemed. First, Abu Laith al-Libi was considered by many to have moved away from the LIFG and to have started working closely with Bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida many years ago. Second, the LIFG is a movement that was largely eliminated inside Libya at the end of the 1990s with most of its members being killed, arrested or forced to flee, and as such has existed since that time primarily as a movement in exile. Moreover, the movement has been delivered further blows in recent years as prominent LIFG members have been arrested abroad and in some cases handed back to Tripoli as part of the war on terrorism. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the leadership of the LIFG, comprising the group's amir `Abdullah Sadiq, his deputy Shaykh Abu Hazim, spiritual leader Abu al-Mundhir al-Sa`idi and two other shaykhs—Muftah al-Dawadi and `Abd al-Wahhab Qa`id, who are incarcerated in the Abu Slim prison on the outskirts of Tripoli—have

been engaged in negotiations with the regime for at least the past year to try to secure their release in return for relinquishing violence.¹

As a result, Abu Laith was never considered to be part of the LIFG leadership but rather represented a remnant faction comprising a handful of Libyans who had fled Afghanistan following the U.S. attacks in November 2001 and who had scattered into Iran and the border areas with Pakistan. That is not to say that this faction had been completely disregarded by the LIFG, as when the negotiations with the regime began the leadership sent an emissary to consult with those factions outside.² Nevertheless, Libyan militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan who were still fully caught up in the world of jihad did not take kindly to the idea that their brothers were contemplating compromising with the “Pharaoh Qadhafi.” In fact, they were so outraged that in 2007 they issued a statement in the name of the LIFG condemning the Qadhafi regime and denying reports that any negotiations were taking place, a development that reportedly angered the LIFG leadership in prison who considered themselves as the only ones with the authority to speak on the group's behalf.³

Abu Laith's November 2007 announcement, therefore, appears to have been an attempt to snatch the leadership of the LIFG for himself and to try to scupper the continuation of negotiations between the true LIFG leadership and the regime. It also seems to have been a rather desperate attempt to bring back some credibility to the group and to the Libyan militant scene more widely. Interestingly, however, Abu Laith did not announce that the LIFG was joining with al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Rather, Abu Laith made it clear that while the LIFG was ready to fight alongside his Algerian brothers, the LIFG was now part of al-

Qa`ida and not AQIM. This, however, is hardly surprising given that there have long been antagonisms between Libyan and Algerian militants born out of a disastrous experience in the 1990s when members of the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA) killed a number of the LIFG's best fighters after they had gone to fight in the Algerian jihad. Indeed, in spite of the shared al-Qa`ida badge, it seems that even Abu Laith was unable to transcend such nationalistic concerns.

Abu Laith's attempt to take over the LIFG and bring it under the al-Qa`ida banner was short lived. He was killed, along with the LIFG's representative in Iran, in an attack by U.S. forces in North Waziristan at the end of January 2008. His death probably marks the final nail in the coffin for this moribund organization. Indeed, it appears to have given fresh impetus to the LIFG's negotiations with the regime, as it was reported in February 2008 that in spite of some resistance from within the Libyan security services a number of LIFG prisoners were to be released, reportedly under the direct instructions of Qadhafi.⁴ The regime is clearly supremely confident that it has finally neutralized this troublesome movement. On April 9, for example, 90 LIFG prisoners were released on the condition that they abandon political activities and strive for the building and the future of the nation.

The Role of Libyan Jihadists

The demise of the LIFG does not, however, mean that support for militancy inside Libya has subsided. In fact, it would appear that if anything there is a renewed surge of Islamist sentiment among some of Libya's youth, particularly in the disaffected eastern regions that have long been the bastion of resistance to the regime. Much of this sentiment appears to be being channeled into support for the Iraqi jihad, with a steady stream of Libyans making their way to join the struggle there. Indeed, as the Sinjar Records show, Libyans are seemingly making up a disproportionately large number of the foreign fighters who have joined the Iraqi jihad.⁵ Although

1 “The LIFG Between Fragmentation and Joining al-Qa`ida” (Arabic), www.almoslim.net, November 14, 2007.

2 Camile Tawille, “Al-Muqatila Wants its Leaders in Afghanistan and Iran...to Take Part in its Dialogue with the Libyan Security Services” (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, January 28, 2007.

3 Personal interview, former Libyan LIFG member, London, 2007.

4 “The Decision of the Releases was Issued by Qadhafi Personally” (Arabic), *Libya al-Youm*, March 4, 2008.

5 Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qa`ida's Foreign*

there are many different motives and reasons that might push a young man to give his life for such a cause—including Arab nationalism or sectarianism—the Islamist dimension is clearly present.

It would, however, be wrong to assume, as some commentators have done, that these recruits found their way to Iraq through LIFG or AQIM networks. Given the difficulty of any organized groups being able to operate inside Libya, as well as the weakness of these organizations, it is more likely that such volunteers went through loose networks tied into a number of preachers or mosques, particularly in the eastern cities of Derna and Benghazi.⁶ Such flows have also been facilitated by the regime's apparent willingness to turn a blind eye to such activism. Moreover, although not confirmed, a number of Iraqi officials have accused the Libyan regime of supporting and facilitating the Iraqi jihad, including Colonel Jubayr Rashid Naif from Anbar Province who, in January 2008, accused Qadhafi's son, Sayf al-Islam, of supporting foreign fighters.⁷ The regime also continues to display a somewhat ambiguous discourse on the Iraqi resistance. In February, for example, a key member of the Libyan regime, Ahmad Ibrahim, told the website IslamOnline.net that "whoever fights the occupation in Iraq are resisters" and that the willingness of the Awakening Councils to fight against al-Qa`ida was *kufir* (heretical) because "whoever co-operates with the American occupation is a *kafir* (heathen) in Islam and a *kafir* in *al-Rubab* (Arabism), nationalism and humanity."⁸ With the regime putting out these kinds of messages, it is not surprising that young Libyans might find it acceptable to fight in Iraq.

Aside from the Libyan volunteers in Iraq, there also appears to be a growth of other militant activism in the

Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008).

6 As the Sinjar Records show, almost all of the Libyan volunteers came from the highly conservative eastern areas, with a particularly high concentration coming from Derna.

7 "Gaddafi Son Linked to Blasts in Iraq," *The Australian*, January 28, 2008.

8 Ahmad Ibrahim, "Libya Didn't Bend Before the West but Behaved in a Clever Manner" (Arabic), IslamOnline.net, February 12, 2005.

east of the country. Although in the current climate there are many rumors coming out of Libya related to stories of weapons stashes being uncovered or cars containing explosives being found, it would seem that a number of incidents have taken place. The most notable occurred in June 2007 when three young militants blew themselves up in a house in Derna, seemingly to evade capture by the security services, something that was confirmed by Sayf al-Islam in an interview he gave with the BBC.⁹ As in the rest of North Africa, it is clear that the underlying causes that are provoking radicalism have not disappeared.

There are many factors that would explain the perpetuation of militant ideology in Libya, particularly in the troubled east that has long been kept purposefully underdeveloped as a form of punishment for its rebellious nature, a rebellion that in fact pre-dates the Qadhafi era and is related to longstanding tribal rivalries. Indeed, although Libya is enjoying its rehabilitation in the international community and oil money is flowing back into the hands of the regime, large swathes of the population still suffer from acute socio-economic grievances including a lack of public service provision, unemployment, poor state wages and a society that operates on the basis of patronage networks and corruption. Combined with a real sense of social injustice, this, as well as the conservative nature of the east and the longstanding antagonisms that have blighted the area, has only served to fuel support for ideological alternatives to what is in fact itself a highly ideological regime.

Jihadist Movement Remains Divided

Whether these disaffected youth aspire to be part of a truly globalized Islamist movement or are even aware of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb is another matter. The rush by commentators to assert that the LIFG had joined AQIM is to misunderstand the nature of the region and the huge cultural differences that exist not only between North African states but also among their Islamist movements. Although it may be true that militants from North Africa have been willing to train or

9 See the BBC interview with Sayf al-Islam, August 2, 2007.

work together, this does not necessarily mean that national priorities do not still override transnational ones. Indeed, in the recent Sulayman case in Tunisia, in which militants clashed with the regime in December 2007, leaving 12 dead and a further 30 arrested, the group allegedly chose to call themselves Jund Assad bin al-Furat, after the Tunisian scholar and fighter who led a Muslim army against Sicily in 827, seemingly reflecting the essentially Tunisian nature of their movement.¹⁰

Similarly in Algeria, while one faction of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) may have chosen to work under the al-Qa`ida banner, it is noticeable that other factions within the same organization have rejected such an association and are splitting away from the AQIM group. Moreover, while those militants in Morocco may well appear to be buying into the AQIM brand, there is no real evidence to suggest that there are real or extensive operational ties between these young jihadists and al-Qa`ida. That is not to say that AQIM does not exist, but rather that in the North African context the synergies should not be overplayed. Each of the militant groups or currents operating there retain their own national characteristics and although international concerns clearly cannot be ignored, these individuals are largely acting in response to specific local conditions that essentially have remained unchanged since the 1980s and 1990s and that prompted the first major wave of Islamic radicalism in the region. In this respect, Libya is no exception.

Alison Pargeter is a Senior Research Associate at the Centre of International Studies at the University of Cambridge. She works on security issues in North Africa with a particular focus on Libya and also on issues related to political Islam in the Middle East and Europe. She has recently completed a major study of the Muslim Brotherhood and is now working on a project on radicalization in North Africa.

10 Personal interviews, Tunisian lawyers defending those arrested in the Sulayman case, February 2008.