Rebel or Mercenary? A Profile of Chad’s General Mahamat Mahdi Ali

Posted on September 7, 2017 by McGregor

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September 7, 2017

In April 2017, the foreign minister of Libya’s Tripoli-based Presidency Council estimated the number of Chadian mercenaries operating in Libya to be 18,000, with another 6,000 hailing from Sudan (Libya Herald, August 23). The numbers emphasized the growing problem of mercenary activity in Libya as well as other parts of Africa.

The first of the Chadian armed groups began operations in Libya’s lawless southern Fezzan region in 2014. Though most of these groups presented themselves as rebels opposing the regime of Chadian president Idriss Déby Itno (who himself took power in a 1990 coup), they shared the common inability to take on Chad’s formidable military. In the meantime, these groups have obtained arms and funding by renting themselves out as mercenaries in Libya’s internal conflict as well as trafficking in people and narcotics through their knowledge of border smuggling routes.

In 2016, Chadian dissident General Mahamat Mahdi Ali gathered many of these groups together under his leadership in the Front pour l’alternance et la concorde au Tchad (FACT – Front for Alternation and Concord in Chad). Operating out of bases south of the Fezzan capital of Sabha, FACT became allied to the powerful Misratan “Third Force militia” (recently renamed the “13th Brigade”), an Islamist group supporting the UN-recognized Presidency Council/Government of National Accord (PC/GNA) administration in Tripoli. In this capacity, FACT became the enemy of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA), a coalition of militias supporting the rival House of Representatives (HoR) government in Tripoli. Despite Haftar’s steady stream of anti-mercenary invective directed at the GNA, most of the Chadian and Sudanese mercenaries in Libya operate alongside forces under his command.

Early Career
The 48-year-old Mahamat Mahdi is a Daza Tubu of the Kecherda sub-group from the Bahr-el-Ghazal region of northern Chad. The Tubu are a nomadic group of roughly 550,000 black Africans speaking a Nilo-Saharan language and sharing cultural similarities with their Tuareg neighbors to the west. The Muslim Tubu are divided into two main groups according to dialect — the northern Teda found in southern Libya, northern Chad and Niger, and the much larger Daza group (also known by their Arabic name, Gura'an) found in Chad and Niger. Clan rivalries have traditionally played a negative role in Tubu attempts at political unification.

**The Teda Tubu** (Joshua Project)

Mahamat Mahdi was a leading member of the rebel Mouvement pour la Democratie et la Justice au Tchad (MDJT – Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad), which operated in Tibesti and other parts of the northern Borku-Ennedi-Tibesti (BET) region of Chad from 1998 to 2003. A ceasefire agreement with N'Djamena provided for positions within the government for leading rebels, and Mahamat Mahdi was accordingly made Inspector of the Ministry of Infrastructure. However, he thought better of remaining in N'Djamena when a wave of assassinations began to strike Déby’s political opponents and joined General Mahamat Nouri’s Sudanese-backed Union des Forces pour la Democratie et le Developpement (UFDD – Union of Forces for Democracy and Development) (Libération, May 29; PANA, December 16, 2003; Le Visionnaire, June 28, 2016).

**The Daza Tubu** (Joshua Project)

Nouri, a Daza Tubu of the Anakaza sub-group was the defense minister in the government of President Hissène Habré, a fellow Anakaza who ruled Chad from 1982 to 1990 before being deposed by General Déby (from the Zaghawa, a group closely related to the Tubu). [1] In 2009, Mahamat Mahdi became secretary-general of the group, mainly composed of Daza Tubu from the Tibesti Mountains, with the Anakaza sub-group as Nouri’s core supporters. [2]

In February 2008, the UFDD reached the Chadian capital of N’Djamena from its bases across the border in Darfur, but was repelled in violent street fighting by forces personally led by President Déby, a reminder that political life had not dulled the ex-general’s tactical edge (TchadActuel, February 17, 2008; Jeune Afrique, February 11, 2008; Le Nouvel Observateur, March 6, 2008).

A 2010 rapprochement between Chad and Sudan put an end to their mutual support for cross-border rebel groups such as the UFDD. Mahamat Mahdi eventually joined Mahamat Nouri in French exile (Chad is a former French colony), but Nouri ordered him to Libya in 2015 in an attempt to revive the UFDD.

**The Creation of FACT**
Most of the prospective fighters for the revived group came from the Kreda and Kecherda sub-groups of the Daza Tubu. Mahamat Mahdi used his influence, particularly among his fellow Kecherda, to bring these fighters under his personal control rather than that of Mahamat Nouri, who could exert little control over the process from his Paris exile. Following a clash between Mahamat Mahdi’s supporters and Nouri’s Anakaza supporters that left 20 of the latter dead, Mahamat Mahdi declared the formation of a new rebel movement, FACT, in March 2016 (VOA/AFP, April 8, 2016). The movement established an operational base inside Chad at Tanoua, a region close to the Libyan border.

Now with a movement of his own behind him, Mahamat Mahdi pointed to the Chadian elections that followed a few weeks later as proof that political change in Chad was impossible through the ballot box:

At the beginning, we hoped that there would be a political change at the end of the presidential election. But it was well known that Déby would not give up power. We saw the result: the real winner was robbed of his victory, the ballot boxes were stuffed, the opposition activists were intimidated… The regime has also tried to divide our movement. Only force will make Déby leave, it is our conviction. Slowly but surely, we are preparing to reach our goal… to put an end to this anarchic regime dominated by a small group of men. We have no personal ambitions. We will not fight to retain power. It is no longer possible nowadays to take power with some 4x4s [as Déby did in 1990] and to keep it (Jeune Afrique, December 21, 2016). [4]

Mercenary Activities

FACT quickly split in June 2016, when its Kreda clan fighters followed former UFDD spokesman Mahamat Hassani Bulmay into a new group, the Conseil de Commandement Militaire pour le Salut de la République (CCMSR – Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic), which later allied itself with the Islamist Libyan militant group Benghazi Defense Brigades (BDB).

FACT Fighters in Libya (Tchad Convergence)

Unlike the Chadian armed groups that sold their services to Haftar’s LNA, FACT’s alliance with the Misratan Third Force and the BDB brought it unwanted attention from the LNA air force. The group’s base at Doualki, near Sabha, was attacked by LNA aircraft on April 14, 2016. [5] FACT’s rear base at Jabal Saoudah near the Chadian border was attacked by LNA aircraft in mid-December 2016, a strike the movement blamed on collusion between the HoR government in Tobruk and the administration in N’Djamena (Tchadconvergance/AFP, December 13, 2016).

LNA warplanes also bombed FACT positions in Jufra. Mahamat Mahdi claimed the attack took him by surprise: “We thought it was an error at first, until Haftar’s entourage asserted that the purpose was to annihilate any rebellion that might destabilize a neighboring state” (Jeune Afrique, December 21, 2016).

According to the UN, FACT participated in the BDB’s March 2017 attack on the LNA-held Ras Lanuf and Sidra oil facilities on the Mediterranean coast, losing a senior commander in the process. [6] FACT was also reported to be involved in clashes with the LNA around the important Tamenhint airbase northeast of the Fezzan capital of Sabha in mid-April, though Mahamat Mahdi denied involvement (RFI, April 16). In retaliation, the LNA’s 116th Battalion shelled the Chadian camps south of Sabha in June after driving the Misratans from Tamenhint (Facebook in Arabic, June 15, via BBC Monitoring).

Despite much evidence of involvement, General Mahamat Mahdi maintains that FACT has a neutral stance in the Libyan conflict: “It is a position of principle and common sense: we are Chadian rebels, we have no reason to interfere with the Libyan problems” (Jeune Afrique, December 21, 2016). The General claims Haftar is colluding with Déby against him.

Chad closed its border with Libya in early January, fearing infiltration of its borders by Tubu rebels and Libyan Islamic State (IS) fighters fleeing northern Libya after the loss of their stronghold at Sirte (Reuters, January 5). France also imposed financial sanctions on
Mahamat Mahdi Ali and his rival Mahamat Nouri on January 19. Nonetheless, Mahamat Mahdi claims that FACT has actually helped prevent the southwards penetration of IS fighters: “We oppose groups like the Islamic State that deny human rights. Our presence is a bulwark to their advance towards Libyan south” (Jeune Afrique, December 21, 2016). Two months later, he emphasized: “Today the only concern is how to contain the Islamic State” (RFI, February 27, 2016).

Chadian Mercenaries and Qatar’s Diplomatic Crisis

Chad announced on August 23 that it was suspending diplomatic relations with Qatar over “the continued involvement of the state of Qatar in attempts to destabilize Chad from Libya” (La Tribune Afrique, August 23; Reuters, August 23). N’Djamena insists it has “irrefutable proof” that Qatar supports and finances Chadian opposition groups based in Libya, despite denials from Doha (RFI, August 26). Chadian Foreign Minister Hissein Brahim Taha stressed that his government’s dispute with Qatar is strictly a bilateral issue and “not the continuation of the diplomatic crisis” in the Gulf region (La Tribune Afrique, August 24).

N’Djamena claims the Qatari financing is funnelled through long-time Chadian rebel leader Timan Erdimi, who has made Doha his home since 2009. (RFI, August 26); [7] Chad has sought Erdimi’s extradition for several months (La Tribune Afrique, August 24). Erdimi is Déby’s nephew and leader of the Union des forces de la résistance (UFR), a Libyan-based Chadian rebel movement that has provided mercenary support for Haftar’s LNA in the battle for Benghazi and was attacked by the Subul al-Salam Brigade for its involvement in criminal activities around Kufra. Subul al-Salam is a Salafist unit affiliated with Haftar’s LNA and composed largely of Zuwaya Arabs, the dominant Arab group in the Kufra region.

A Libyan-based Chadian rebel group was reported to have crossed the border on the weekend of August 19-20, killing a number of Chadian government troops in a surprise attack. UFR spokesman Yusuf Hamid insists his group was not responsible for the attack: “I categorically deny the accusations of the Chadian government. We did not get anything from Qatar, not a single penny, not a small piece of equipment. Nothing.” (RFI, August 24). If true, this leaves the possibility that the strike was undertaken by Mahamat Mahdi’s larger FACT movement (though there remains a chance it could have been the work of one of the lesser Chadian armed groups active in southern Libya).

Two members of the Kufra-based Subul al-Salam Battalion in southeastern Libya were killed during a clash with Chadian gunmen on August 26. The clash occurred in the Hanagar region some 300 kilometers southwest of Kufra, where the same two groups battled last February. Subul al-Salam claimed to have killed seven Chadians, whose identity cards suggested they were mercenaries working for the LNA-affiliated Ali al-Thumin Brigade (Libya Herald, August 26; Libya Observer, August 26; Libya Observer, February 2; Libyan Express, August 26). The Battalion has also engaged several times in the last few years with Darfur rebels now operating in the region as mercenaries or highwaymen.

Conclusion

Mahamat Mahdi Ali is a strong irritation for the Déby regime in Chad but a constant source of destabilization in Libya. Despite Mahamat Mahdi’s frequent assertions that times have changed, it seems difficult to identify any other plan for him to achieve regime change in N’Djamena other than “to take power with some 4x4s.” Beyond his core group of up to 1500 fighters (some of whom may be in it strictly for the money), there is little evidence of popular support for Mahamat Mahdi’s movement within Chad, where both government and opposition continue to be dominated by the Tubu and related groups, a tiny minority of Chad’s total population. In addition, President Déby’s authoritarianism is overlooked by France and the United States, which value him as a partner in the War on Terrorism. Mahamat Mahdi Ali is thus an important example of a new type of African mercenary ready and willing to exploit regional conflicts for profit while using the cover of legitimate political resistance.

Notes

[1] After a long legal odyssey, Habré was sentenced to life in prison on May 30, 2016 by a Special African Tribunal in Senegal for mass-torture, rape and the murder of 40,000 Chadians during his time as president.


[4] The tactics of using 4x4 trucks equipped with anti-tank missiles and heavy machine guns were perfected by General Hassan Djamous (Bidayat) during the 1987 “Toyota War” between Chad and Libya and have been used in a variety of military campaigns in the Sahara/Sahel region since.


[6] Ibid.

Islamic State Announces Libyan Return with Slaughter of LNA Personnel in Jufra

A late-night strike by a large group of Islamic State militants on a Libyan National Army (LNA) checkpoint near Fugha in the central province of Jufra was a bloody warning that the Islamic State is regrouping in Libya after a major defeat late last year.

The dead included nine soldiers of the 131st Infantry Battalion and two civilians from Sirte who had the misfortune of arriving at the checkpoint as the killings were ongoing (al-Wasat, August 23, 2017). The men had apparently been taken prisoner first, as they died from close range shots to the head or from being beheaded or having their throats slit.

The killers left the scene with stolen arms and vehicles after setting fire to the checkpoint and everything they couldn’t carry away (Libya Observer, August 23, 2017). The Islamic State’s Amaq news agency claimed a total of 21 LNA personnel had been either killed or wounded in the attack (Telegram messaging service, August 23, 2017).

The Islamic State militants were forced out of their stronghold in the coast city of Sirte late last year by Bunyan al-Marsous (“Solid Structure”), a Misratan-led coalition of militias (mostly Islamist), aided by punishing air strikes by American warplanes based offshore.

Eight of the soldiers at Fugha were from Surman and were former members of the 32nd Mechanized Brigade, a Qaddafist-era elite unit commanded by the late Colonel Khamis al-Qaddafi, son of the Libyan leader (Libya Herald, August 23, 2017). Despite their reputation as loyal, even fanatical, Qaddafists, some veterans of the Brigade were integrated into the 131st Battalion after the revolution. The battalion battled the Islamist Benghazi Defense Brigades (BDB) in the coastal oil crescent region in early March 2017. A surprise strike by the BDB against the Sidra and Ras Lanuf oil terminals on March 3 ejected LNA units (including the 131st) from the area, while there were unconfirmed reports that two NCOs of the 131st Battalion had been captured and beheaded by the BDB. The deceased were later identified as Muhammad Oweidat and Imad Zlitni, but the BDB denied beheading the two soldiers (Libya Herald, March 12, 2017).
LNA Forces seize Jufra Airbase in June, 2017 (Libya Express)

The LNA expelled the BDB from its bases in Jufra in a rapid campaign in early June. The operation was helped by the fact that the BDB had lost local support following an especially vicious assault on the LNA-held Brak al-Shatti airbase on May 18. Seven civilians and over 130 captive soldiers of the LNA’s 10th and 12th Brigades were slaughtered by the BDB and their allies. Many had their throats slit, while others appear to have had their heads run over by trucks.

Surman, the home of eight of the soldiers killed at the Fugha checkpoint, was the scene of fighting in March 2016 between local fighters and male and female Islamic State terrorists from Tunisia who had escaped American airstrikes and a February 25-28 offensive against Islamic State fighters in neighboring Sabratha. During its brief occupation of Sabratha, the Islamic State militants beheaded 12 policemen after overrunning their station but were unable to fulfill their intention of destroying the Roman ruins there. After the beheadings, ten of the terrorists were killed by the Surman fighters; a woman and her child were the only prisoners (Libya Observer, March 3, 2016).

Both LNA commander ‘Field Marshal’ Khalifa Haftar and Faiez Serraj, chairman of the rival UN-recognized Presidency Council, promised a firm response to the Fugha attack. To some degree, the Islamic State has been able to exploit the lack of a united response to their activities due to political and military divisions within Libya. The massacre at Fugha was the first large-scale operation by Islamic State fighters since the collapse of their Sirte stronghold last December and suggests the movement may have successfully regrouped to launch a new phase of their campaign to impose an Islamic Caliphate on Libya.

Posted in Islamic State, Libya | Tagged Fugha
Lieutenant General Ali Kanna Sulayman, a member of the Tuareg ethnic group, ruled the military district of southwestern Libya during the Qaddafi era. Ali Kanna was forced from Libya into exile in Niger during the Libyan Revolution, but unlike many of his Tuareg Libyan Army comrades who joined rebel movements in northern Mali, Ali Kanna kept his eyes on Libya, waiting for a chance to reinsert himself as leader of a neo-Qaddafist movement in the Fezzan region. Since his quiet return several years ago, Ali Kanna has tried to organize a multi-ethnic “Army of the Fezzan” and succeeded in reasserting his authority in Tuareg-held regions of southern Libya while attempting to rally the Tubu and Arab tribes of Fezzan in a common cause. With the recent release of many leading Qaddafists from prison, Ali Kanna stands to be a major player in the gathering neo-Qaddafist revival.

Background

In 2004, Ali Kanna was appointed commander of the newly formed Maghawir Brigade, a unit of approximately 3,000 Sahelian Tuareg (i.e. hailing from Niger and Mali rather than Libya) based in the Fezzan city of Ubari. When the 2011 revolution broke out, the brigade used deadly violence to repress protests in Tripoli and fought revolutionaries in northwestern Libya. [1]

When the unit broke up in the latter stages of the revolution, those Tuareg members who did not return to Mali or Niger formed the Tendé Brigade in the Fezzan city of Ubari. The brigade would play a major role in the severe fighting that took place there against the Tubu in 2014.

Exile

Most of the Sahelian Tuareg deserted Qaddafi as things began to look bad for the regime during the 2011 revolution. Ali Kanna fled to Niger rather than northern Mali, where the Tuareg, who had brought their arms with them, formed new rebel movements to establish the new nation of “Azawad.” General Ali Sharif al-Rifi, another committed Qaddafist supporter and his last air force commander, also fled to Niger, and the two generals settled temporarily in the historic city of Agadez. Al-Rifi later moved to the Niger capital of Niamey, where he associated with Sa’ad al-Qaddaf until the latter was deported to Libya in 2014. Al-Rifi was reported to have returned to his home in the Fezzan town of Waddan in June 2017, a sign that Qaddafists now feel it is safe to return to Libya (Libya Herald, June 18, 2017).
In September 2013, a group of Fezzani elders met in Ubari to declare the establishment of Fezzan as an autonomous federal province of Libya in response to the inability of authorities to provide either services or security in the region. Most of those involved were Qaddafists but the initiative went nowhere, having failed to involve local communities and institutions (al-Arabiya, September 26, 2013; Libya Herald, September 28, 2013).

**Return**

After his return to Fezzan, Ali Kanna initially allied himself with the Misratan Third Brigade against the forces of “Field Marshal” Khalifa Haftar, a Qaddafist general who was repudiated by Qaddafi after his defeat and capture in Chad’s 1986-87 “Toyota War.” Understandably bitter over his treatment, Haftar was rescued from captivity by the CIA and brought to the United States to act as an asset-in-waiting should the United States commit itself to regime change in Libya. Never deployed for this purpose, Haftar returned to Libya during the revolution seeking to establish himself as a national strongman in the Qaddafi mold, accepting aid to accomplish this from anyone willing to offer it, including Egypt, the UAE and Russia.

Ali Kanna made a bold move to reshape the political and military landscape of the Fezzan when he held a gathering of tribal and village representatives to ask the youths of every tribe to abandon their allegiances to various militias and join a new “Army of the Fezzan,” warning there was “a great threat to the people of the South” (Paris Match, May 22, 2016). The Fezzan Army would be loyal to the principles of the Jamahiriya rather than the GNA government in Tripoli or the rival HoR government in Tobruk (Middle East Eye, November 11, 2016).

Ali Kanna appeared to make progress with his concept of a Fezzan Army independent of Libya’s rival governments in October 2016, when a group of southern Libyan National Army (LNA – a military coalition under the command of Khalifa Haftar) officers appointed him commander of the “Libyan Arab Armed Forces in South Libya.” General Ali Kanna was explicit that his new command would remain aloof from politics and would not support any government until the achievement of national unification. LNA headquarters treated the incident as a rebellion and sent General Muhammad Ben Nayel to surround and disarm the dissident officers (Digital Journal, October 9, 2017; Libyan Express, October 10, 2017). General Ben Nayel was commander of the LNA’s 12th Brigade and an important figure within the Arab Magarha tribe.

Without sufficient support for the initiative, Ali Kanna changed course and declared he would work with any national army operating under a unified national leadership (Libya Herald, April 13, 2017). Of course, the establishment of such an army is still far from sight.

There was speculation that Ali Kanna and other returning Qaddafists were seeking to carve out a new place for themselves in Libya by dedicating themselves to ridding Libya of Islamic State forces, even if this meant coming under the command of Khalifa Haftar.

**The Qaddafist Revival – 2017**

When Sa’iif al-Islam Qaddafi was released from a Zintan prison in early June 2017 after six years imprisonment, there were reports of street celebrations in Sabha and a rumor that he had joined Ali Kanna in the Fezzan (Libya Herald, June 10, 2017). Sa’iif, who was sentenced to death in 2015, is widely regarded as the most likely of Qaddafi’s surviving progeny to revive Qaddafism as a political ideology in Libya. Sa’iif al-Islam’s release was followed by the release of 30 officers of Qaddafi’s army and other Qaddafi supporters from Hadba prison in Tripoli (Libya Herald, June 11, 2017). Days later Sa’adi Qaddafi, Abu Zayid Dourda (a chief administrator in Qaddafi’s government) and former intelligence chief Abdullah al-Senussi were transferred from prison to a luxury hotel in Tripoli where they were allowed to meet with supporters. Up to that point, al-Senussi, Qaddafi’s top enforcer, was awaiting his execution under a death sentence issued two years ago (Libya Herald, June 13, 2017; Arab News, February 22, 2017).
Ali Kanna expressed his continued devotion to the Libyan Jamahiriya (the Qaddafist state) on September 1, 2016 during a ceremony in Ghat to mark the 47th anniversary of the Libyan Revolution of 1969 (Lavoixdelalibye.com, September 24, 2016).

Ali Kanna’s status was evident when he attended the ceremony marking the completion of the reconciliation agreement between the Tuareg and Tubu in May 2017. The agreement was the culmination of peace efforts started after a bitter conflict between the two groups nearly destroyed the Fezzan city of Ubari in 2014. Ali Kanna was reported to have played an important role in the Doha-sponsored mediation process after his 2015 return to Libya.

In May 2017, the Misratan 13th Brigade (the former “Third Force”) conducted a peaceful handover of the Sharara oil field to Ali Kanna’s Tuareg militia, their former allies. Sharara was seized in 2014 by the Third Force and local Tuareg allies who forced out Tubu and Zintani militias (Libya Herald, May 25, 2017).

Under pressure from local tribal militias, the 13th Brigade then evacuated Tamenhint Air Base north of Sabha, which was quickly occupied by the LNA’s 12th Brigade with support from the LNA’s 116th Brigade (Libya Herald, May 25, 2017). The 13th Brigade’s withdrawal was a major setback for the Misratan supporters of Libya’s internationally recognized government, the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA).

Conclusion

Sa’if al-Qaddafi appears unlikely to abandon politics now that he has been released from prison, but restoring Qaddafism as an ideology in Libya will be slow and careful work. Part of these efforts will involve exploiting a relationship with Khalifa Haftar’s LNA and the GNA’s rival, the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) government, which has expressed a willingness to allow members of the Qaddafi regime to re-enter public life. To complete his encirclement of Tripoli and the GNA, Haftar needs support in the Fezzan, the last region to fall to the anti-Qaddafi revolutionaries in the 2011 revolution. The vast oil and natural gas reserves of the Murzuq Basin and Fezzan’s al-Sharara and al-Fil oil operations are also major strategic assets of immense value to whoever controls them.

In the meantime, Ali Kanna, who is widely believed to have close ties to Algerian intelligence [2], can offer protection to Sa’if al-Qaddafi and a potential military base of veteran fighters capable of making Sa’if a political force in Fezzan to be reckoned with. Though this process remains fraught with uncertainty and a Fezzani population that is by no means solidly pro-Qaddafist, the resurgence of General Ali Kanna Sulayman will continue to go hand-in-hand with the revival of Qaddafism in post-revolution Libya.

Notes


Qatar’s Role in the Libyan Conflict: Who’s on the Lists of Terrorists and Why

Posted on July 14, 2017 by McGregor

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July 14, 2017

The Middle East diplomatic crisis that has set a coalition of Arab states against Qatar has inevitably spilled over into Libya. A number of those states party to the dispute have been involved in a proxy war, with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt backing the eastern-based House of Representatives (HoR) and Khalifa Haftar’s anti-Islamist Libyan National Army (LNA), while Qatar and (to a lesser extent) Turkey support the Tripoli-based and UN-recognized Presidency Council/Government of National Accord (GNA).
Al-Sadiq Abd al-Rahman Ali al-Ghariani

The main issues in the Gulf dispute are Qatar’s sponsorship of al-Jazeera and the channel’s willingness to criticize regional leaders (save Qatar’s al-Thani royal family), Qatar’s provision of a refuge for members of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, its support for Islamist movements and its cooperative relations with Iran, with which it shares one of the world’s largest natural gas fields.

Amid the dispute Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE produced a “terrorist list” of 59 Qatari or Qatari-allied individuals from nine Arab countries, including five individuals from Libya (The National [Abu Dhabi], June 9). The list-makers seek to coerce Qatar to assist in Iran’s isolation and to end its support for the Muslim Brotherhood. This Arab states’ list was followed by a second list of 76 Libyan “terrorists” issued by the HoR’s Defense and National Security Committee on June 12, seven days after the HoR and its interim government severed relations with Qatar (Libya Herald, June 12).

What follows examines the most notable Libyans named on those lists, their contacts with Qatar and the reasons behind their inclusion.

Qatar’s Involvement in Libya

During Libya’s 2011 revolution, Qatar deployed its air force against then Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi’s loyalists and installations. It also provided substantial arms and supplies to revolutionary forces in Libya, earning it a significant degree of good will within the country.

Since then, however, Qatar has focused its support on Islamist forces operating in Libya, a policy that has aggrieved nations such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, all of which seek to stifle the growth of Islamist movements that could challenge the legitimacy of their regimes. Qatar’s continued insistence on playing a role in Libya’s domestic politics since then has also brought on resentment and even anger in many quarters of Libyan society. Both Egypt and the UAE, meanwhile, mount regular air operations against Islamist targets inside Libya. [2]

On June 8, LNA spokesman Colonel Ahmad al-Mismari presented audio, video and documentary evidence of massive political and military interference by Qatar in Libya since the 2011 revolution, comprising a wave of assassinations (including an attempt on Haftar’s life), recruitment and transport of Libyan jihadists to Syria, funding of extremist groups and training in bombing techniques via Hamas operatives from the Khan Yunis Brigade. Much of this activity was allegedly orchestrated by Muhammad Hamad al-Hajri, chargé d’affaires at the Qatari embassy in Libya, and intelligence official General Salim Ali al-Jarboui, the military attaché (al-Arabiya, June 9; The National [Abu Dhabi], June 8).

Mismari also claimed on June 22 to have records of “secret meetings” held by the Sudan Armed Forces and attended by Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir that confirmed a conspiracy to support terrorism in Libya, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and alleged that Qatar and Iran were operating arms factories in Sudan to supply Libyan terrorists (Libya Herald, June 22).

On June 29, al-Mismari declared that the LNA was fighting “not with Libyan terrorists, but with transnational terrorism” supported by “the triad of terrorism in Libya,” Qatar, Sudan and Turkey. The colonel also claimed that the LNA’s intelligence department had obtained recordings of an al-Jazeera correspondent coordinating covert flights by Qatari aircraft to Libya to “support terrorist groups” (al-Arabiya, June 29).

Egypt also views Libya as a battleground for its efforts to eliminate the Muslim Brotherhood. On June 28, Egypt’s foreign ministry claimed Qatar was supporting terrorist groups in Libya operating under the leadership of the Brotherhood, resulting in terrorist attacks in Egypt (Asharq al-Awsat, June 29; al-Arabiya, June 28).

Qatar provides a home and refuge for members of the Muslim Brotherhood, but it does so on the condition that they do not involve themselves in Qatari politics. The local chapter of the Brotherhood shut itself down in 1999 after expressing approval of the emirate’s political and social direction (The National [Abu Dhabi], May 18, 2012).

The Muslim Brotherhood’s political misadventures in Egypt led to distrust of the Brothers’ agenda in Libya, especially as the movement...
still struggles to establish grass-roots support after decades of existence in the Gaddafi era as a movement for Libyan professionals living in European exile.

**List One: The Arab States’ List**

The “terrorist” list issued by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE included the following Libyan individuals:

**Ali Muhammad al-Salabi** – Al-Salabi, a second-generation Muslim Brother, was sentenced to eight years in prison at 18-years-of-age for his alleged connection to a plot to kill Gaddafi.

The intellectual and spiritual leader of the Libyan Brotherhood, al-Salabi consistently presents himself as a proponent of democracy and cooperation with international efforts to combat terrorism (Libya Herald, March 1, 2016). Al-Salabi developed ties with Qatar in 2009, when Qatar funded an al-Salabi headed de-radicalization initiative for imprisoned members of the al-Qaeda associated Jamaa al-Islamiya al-Muqatila bi-Libya (Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, or LIFG). When the 2011 revolution erupted, al-Salabi returned to Libya to act as a local conduit for Qatari arms, intelligence and military training. He now holds Qatari citizenship and has a close relationship to Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Muslim Brotherhood’s 91-year-old Qatar-based spiritual leader (also named on the list) (Libya Herald, October 5, 2015). Al-Salabi has close ties with Abd al-Hakim Belhaj (see below), with whom he founded the Islamist Hizb al-Watan (Homeland Party) in 2011.

**Abd al-Hakim Belhaj** – An allegedly reformed militant, Belhaj is chairman of Hizb al-Watan, believed to be financed by Qatar. Belhaj was amir of the LIFG and the leader of the post-revolutionary Tripoli Military Council. He is believed to have received substantial support from Qatar during the 2011 revolution and routinely defends Qatari activities in Libya against their critics.

**Mahdi al-Harati** – A Libyan-born Irish citizen with military experience in Kosovo and Iraq, al-Harati returned from Ireland during the 2011 revolution and took command of the Tripoli Brigade. Briefly mayor of Tripoli before being ousted in 2015, al-Harati later led Libyan and Syrian fighters in Syria as part of the anti-government Liwa al-Ummah, a unit alleged to have included London Bridge attacker Rachid Redouane, a resident of Ireland (al-Arabiya, June 9; Libya Herald, June 9; Telegraph, June 6). The LNA alleges al-Harati is supported by Qatari intelligence (al-Arabiya, June 9).

**Ismail Muhammad al-Salabi** – Brother of Ali Muhammad al-Salabi, Ismail was imprisoned by Gaddafi in 1997 and released in 2004. He became a principal recipient of Qatari arms shipments during the revolution as commander of the Raffalah Sahati militia, part of a coalition of Islamist militias known as the February 17 Brigade (al-Hayat, May 19, 2014). Clashes with Hatar’s LNA began in 2014 and continue to this day, with Ismail serving a prominent member of the Benghazi Defense Brigades (BDB) coalition. He is reputed to have a close relationship with Qatari intelligence chief Ghanim bin Khalifa al-Kubaisi (al-Arabiya, June 9).

**Al-Sadiq Abd al-Rahman Ali al-Gharaini** – The 75-year-old al-Gharaini was, until recently, the controversial Grand Mufti of Libya and the head of the Dar al-Ifta, the office responsible for issuing fatwa’s (religious rulings). The Mufti considers Haftar and those under him to be “infidels” and has called for the destruction of the HoR, which voted to sack him in November 2014. The Dar al-Ifta office in Tripoli was shut down by the GNA on June 1, 2017, and all its contents were confiscated (al-Arabiya, June 1). A strong supporter of Qatar’s involvement in Libya who commands the allegiance of several Islamist militias, the Mufti is perceived by some Libyans as a supporter of religious extremism. Nonetheless, the League of Libyan Ulama (religious scholars) issued a strong condemnation of the Mufti’s inclusion in the terrorist list, warning against “accusing the righteous” (Libya Herald, May 10).

**Benghazi Defense Brigades (BDB)** – The BDB was one of 12 organizations to appear on the “terrorist” list. A coalition of soldiers, Islamists and revolutionaries, the BDB pledged allegiance to Mufti al-Gharaini. The BDB offered to demobilize and disband on June 23 following an intense backlash after their brutal attack on the Brak al-Shatti airbase on May 18 and their subsequent failure to hold Jufra against an LNA offensive. [3] The coalition claimed it had been disparaged as a terrorist group only after it exposed a plot by France, Turkey and the UAE to invade Libya (Libya Herald, June 23; Libya Observer, June 23). On June 6, Misratan officials ordered the BDB (which it called “the Mufti’s forces”) to disband and surrender their weapons, threatening force if their demand was not complied with (Libya Herald, June 6). Instead, the group relocated to Sabratha, where it remained under arms. By July 10, the still-undissolved BDB was reported to be leading an offensive by pro-Khalifa Ghwell forces against pro-GNA militias in Garabulli, east of Tripoli (Libya Herald, July 10; Libya Express, July 9). [4]

The BDB, noting the UAE’s active military role in the Libyan conflict and its support for the “war criminal” Haftar, described the list as a fabrication designed with the intent of imposing “political restrictions on anyone who poses a threat to the UAE’s attempt at supremacy over the entire region” (Libya Observer, June 10).

**List Two: The HoR’s List**

The majority of those on the HoR list are based in Tripolitania. Most of those listed share an opposition to Haftar, the LNA and/or the HoR, though the role of many is inflated. Many are described as members of the “Muqatila,” a shorthand reference to the now defunct LIFG. The inference is that they are former members or remain sympathetic to the goals of the group, which was once closely associated with al-Qaeda.

While there is no apparent order to the HoR list, it makes more sense when those on it are gathered into focused groups, along with more detailed (and occasionally corrected) descriptions. There is, however, often some overlap in these unofficial categories.
The Muslim Brotherhood (MB)

Twenty-nine members of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood made the list. The MB described the inclusion of its members on a “terrorist list” as “defamation” (Libya Herald, June 11). Many are resident in Doha, the Qatari capital, and receive Qatari funding. The most prominent of those included are:

**JCP Chairman Muhammad Sawan**

**Muhammad Sawan** – Chairman of the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Hizb al-Adala wal-Tamiyya (Justice & Construction Party, or JCP), since its founding in 2012. He is a Misratan who was imprisoned during the Gaddafi era.

**Ahmad al-Suqi** – The head of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, elected in October 2015.

**Nizar Kawan** – An Amazigh (Berber) member of the Libyan State Council and an official in the JCP. Kawan was the victim of a failed assassination attempt and RPG attack on his home in June 2014. The attack was allegedly instigated by the pro-Haftar Libyan ambassador to the UAE, Aref al-Nayed, who was recorded urging a similar attempt on the life of Khalid al-Sharif (see below) (Libya Observer, September 3, 2015).

**Fawzi Bukatif** (RFI)

**Fawzi Bukatif** – A Misratan, Bukatif is the current Libyan ambassador to Uganda. A reputed financial coordinator for the MB with Qatar, he was the commander of the February 17 Brigade during the revolution and has close ties to Ismail al-Salabi. Bukatif accused the HoR of inciting violence with the list and threatened legal action: “I’m not against Haftar or the HoR, but I don’t agree with what they are doing. It seems they want to fight and kill anyone who disagrees with them” (Libya Herald, June 12).

**Dar al-Ifta and Associates of Sadiq al-Ghariani**

The most prominent of these are:
**Abd al-Basit Ghwaila** (Daily Mail)

**Abd al-Basit Ghwaila** – Director of the Tripoli office of the Ministry of Awqaf (religious endowments), Ghwaila is a Libyan-born Canadian citizen. He became the focus of attention when it was revealed that he was a close friend of the father of Manchester bomber Salman Abedi as well as the founder of an Islamic youth group to which Salman belonged. In 2016, his own son Awais was killed fighting alongside extremists in Benghazi. Ghwaila is an important official in al-Ghariani’s Tanasuh Foundation and a regular preacher on the Mufti’s Tanasuh TV station (Libya Herald, June 6).

**Salem Jaber** – A leader in the now dissolved Dar al-Ifta, Shaykh Salem advocates jihad and is a Salafist proponent of Saudi-style Islamic education. He demands beards for men and has called for drinkers and fornicators to be whipped. The list suggests he is a spiritual leader in the BDB.

**Hamza Abu Faris** – A leading Libyan religious scholar and former Islamic affairs minister, he is described on the list as an associate of the BDB and “instigator of jihad.”

**The Manchester/Birmingham Connection**

**Tahir Nasuf** – A Manchester-based LIFG fundraiser and former director of the group’s main fundraising organization, the now banned UK-based al-Sanabel Relief Agency. Funds flowed from Sanabel to Abu Anas al-Libi in Afghanistan, wanted for alleged involvement in the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar al-Salaam (The Guardian, May 28). Nasuf was on the UN sanctions list from 2006 to 2011.

**Khalid Tawfik Nasrat** – A former LIFG leader and the father of Zuhair Nasrat, one of the detainees in the investigations of the Manchester attack. Zuhair was arrested at the south Manchester Nasrat family home where Manchester bomber Salman Abedi frequently stayed. Nasrat and his two eldest sons returned to Libya to fight in the 2011 revolution (Daily Mail, May 29).

**Abd al-Basit Azzouz** (BBC)

**Abd al-Basit Azzouz** – After fighting in Afghanistan, LIFG member Azzouz arrived in Manchester in 1994, where he settled alongside other LIFG members. In 2006, he was arrested by British police for alleged ties to al-Qaeda and detained for over nine months before being released on bail. Azzouz left for Pakistan and was appointed head of Libyan al-Qaeda operations by al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in May 2011. An expert bomb-maker, Azzouz had some 200 recruits under his command in Libya. Suspected of involvement in the 2012 attack on the American consulate in Benghazi, he was named in 2014 by the U.S. State Department as one of ten “specially designated global terrorists” (Telegraph, September 27, 2014; Express [London], May 24). He was arrested in Turkey in 2014 in a joint Turkish/CIA operation and sent to Jordan before his expected deportation to the United States to face charges. His public trail goes cold after that (Hurriyet [Istanbul], December 4, 2014). In February 2016, the UN added him to its al-Qaeda sanctions list, implying he was again at large. [6]
Bashir Muhammad al-Faqih – He is described in the list as “the spiritual leader of al-Qaeda and the LIFG in Libya.” As a resident of Birmingham and former member of the LIFG, al-Faqih was convicted and sentenced to four years in prison in 2007 after admitting to charges under the UK’s Terrorism Act. In 2014, his appeal to the European Court of Justice resulted in an EU order to overturn his conviction and return his passport (BBC, July 17, 2007; Manchester Evening News, October 8, 2010). He was involved in al-Qaeda financing via the Sanabel Relief Agency, which put him on the UN sanctions list from 2006 to 2011.

Politicians

The most prominent of these are:

Abd al-Rahman al-Shaibani al-Suwehli – As chairman of the Libyan State Council since April 6, 2016, Suwehli has challenged the legitimacy of the HoR. A bulletin from the State Council said that the HoR was using the term “terrorism” to vilify and denigrate their opponents through the list and threatened legal action (Libya Herald, June 12). Suwehli and Presidency Council chief Fayez Serraj were targeted for assassination when their motorcade came under heavy fire on February 20. Suwehli later accused GNS head Khalifa Ghwell of being behind the attack (Libya Herald, February 20).

Omar al-Hassi – After the formation of the elected HoR in 2014, the Islamist al-Hassi became “prime minister” of an alternative parliament formed from GNC members who had failed to be re-elected. He was dismissed in 2015 after unspecified accusations by an auditor. The list provides the unlikely description “field commander and political official in BDB.”

Benghazi Defense Brigades (BDB)

The most prominent commanders on the list are:

Brigadier General Mustafa al-Sharkasi – A professional soldier and former air force colonel in the Gaddafi-era, al-Sharkasi has emerged as the dominant commander in the BDB. Turning against the regime, he acted as a militia commander in Misrata during the revolution. Once part of Haftar’s LNA, he is now bitterly opposed to him (Libya Herald, November 13, 2016).

Al-Saadi al-Nawfali – The leader of the Operations Room for the Liberation of the Cities of Ajdabiya and Support for the Revolutionaries of Benghazi. This group cooperates closely with the BDB, in which he also holds a leadership position. Al-Nawfali has been variously described as an al-Qaeda operative, a former Ansar al-Sharia commander in Ajdabiya and a supporter of Islamic State (IS) forces.

Anwar Sawan – A Misratan supporter of the BDB and the Benghazi Shura Council, Sawan is a major arms dealer to Misratan Islamist militias. He supported the fight against IS in Sirte and opposes both Haftar and Serraj.
Ziyad Belam — A commander in the BDB and former leader of Benghazi’s Omar al-Mukhtar Brigade and the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC), an alliance of Benghazi-based Islamist militias that once included local IS fighters. He was seriously wounded in an assassination attempt in October 2014.

The BDB responded to the HoR’s “terrorist” list by providing their own “top 11” terrorist list focused on eastern-based civilian supporters of Haftar and the HoR. The most prominent individuals on the list were HoR President Ageela al-Salah and HoR Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thinni. (Libya Herald, June 16).

Islamic State (IS)

Ali al-Safrani and Abd al-Hadi Zarqun (a.k.a. Abd al-Hadi al-Warfali) — Both were accused of being financiers for IS in Libya. Sanctions were imposed on the two by the U.S. Treasury Department in April.

Mahmoud al-Barasi — A former Ansar al-Sharia commander in Benghazi, now purported by the list to be an IS amir in that city. He once said Ansar’s fight was against “democracy, secularism and the French,” and labeled government members “apostates” who could be killed (Libya Herald, November 25, 2013).

Al-Qaeda Operatives

The most notable of these are:

Muhammad al-Darsi — A leading al-Qaeda figure in Libya, Darsi was given a life sentence in Jordan in 2007 for planning to blow up that nation’s main airport. He was released in 2014 in exchange for the kidnapped Jordanian ambassador to Libya, who was seized by gunmen in Tripoli (al-Jazeera, May 14, 2014).

Abd al-Moneim al-Hasnawi — Allegedly a high-ranking member of Katibat al-Muhajirin in Syria, Abd al-Moneim was recently spotted back in Sabah (Fezzan), where he was allegedly working with the Misratan Third Brigade, the BDB and the remnants of Ibrahim Jadhman’s Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) (Menastream.com, November 15, 2016). The list describes him as a representative for al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in southern Libya.

Militia Commanders

Salah Badi — A Misratan, Badi was an officer in Gaddafi’s army but was later imprisoned. A former GNC parliamentarian, he resigned in 2014. Badi formed the Jabhat al-Samud (Steadfastness Front) in Tripoli in June 2015. Badi supports Khalifa Ghweil’s GNS and opposes
both the GNA and Haftar. He was recently seen leading the Samud Front in a pro-GNS offensive against Tripoli in early July (Libya Herald, July 7).

**Tariq Durman** – Leads the Ihsan Brigade in Tripoli, which is made up of supporters of Mufti al-Ghariani. He supports the GNS.

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**Khalid al-Sharif**

Khalid al-Sharif – A deputy amir in the LIFG, Khalid was captured in 2003 and held prisoner in a secret CIA detention center in Afghanistan for two years. He was then returned to Libya and imprisoned under Gaddafi (Christian Science Monitor, May 7, 2015). Khalid controlled Tripoli’s Hadba prison until May 26, when it was seized by Haitham Tajouri's Tripoli Revolutionaries’ Brigade, which then destroyed al-Sharif’s home (Libya Herald, May 27). A search revealed the prison to have contained a bomb-making factory (Libya Herald, June 4). In June, the Libyan National Committee for Human Rights tied Manchester bomber Salman Abedi to Khalid al-Sharif and other former LIFG members and demanded the International Criminal Court and the UN investigate “Qatar’s role as a financier of this group” (Arab News, June 3).

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**Sami al-Sa’adi** (ITV)

Sami al-Sa’adi – Al-Saadi left Libya for Afghanistan in 1988, where he became a deputy amir of the LIFG. He was arrested in a joint UK/US operation in 2004 and returned to Libya, where he was tortured and spent six years in prison. The UK paid £2.2 million in compensation in 2012 but did not accept responsibility for the rendition. After the revolution, he became close to Mufti al-Ghariani, founded the Umma al-Wasat Party and was a commander in the Islamist Libya Dawn coalition. In late May, Saadi’s Tripoli home was destroyed by the Tripoli Revolutionaries’ Brigade (Libya Herald, May 27).

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**Ahmad Abd al-Jalil al-Hasnawi** – A Libyan Shield southern district commander, the LNA claimed al-Hasnawi planned and led the BDB’s Brak al-Shatti attack (Libya Herald, May 19; Channel TV [Amman], May 22, via BBC Monitoring). A GNA loyalist, al-Hasnawi commands wide support within his Fezzani Hasawna tribe.

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**Outlook**

The Libyan component of these two “terrorist” lists have a common purpose — to lessen foreign resistance to the takeover of Libya by the HoR-backed LNA while simultaneously discrediting the counter-efforts of Qatar.

Egypt’s military regime in particular is determined to eliminate Muslim Brotherhood influence in the region. Another common theme of the lists is the insistence that the arms embargo on Libya be lifted in order to supply Haftar with the weapons needed to defeat “terrorism” and control the flow of “foreign fighters” (despite their being used by both Haftar’s LNA and pro-GNA forces).

Clearly designed for an international audience, the HoR’s list is light on IS militants (already despised by the West) and heavy on political, military and religious opponents to Haftar and his Egyptian and UAE backers. The BDB, as one of the strongest military challengers to
Haftar’s LNA, is particularly singled out.

While some of the individuals mentioned above have long histories of supporting terrorist activity, many of the lists’ lesser individuals not included here can only be regarded as having the most tenuous of links, if any, to terrorism.

In this sense, the list may be viewed as political preparation for an expected Haftar assault on Tripoli later this year, branding all possible opposition in advance as “terrorists” for international consumption.

Notes

1. A Qatari official insisted that at least six of the individuals on the list were already dead (Foreign Policy, June 15).
2. The UAE uses al-Khadim airbase in Marj province for operations by AT-802 light attack aircraft and surveillance drones (Jane’s 360, October 28, 2016). The UAE also controls an estimated 70% of Libyan media, according to an Emirati investigative website (Libya Observer, June 13).
4. Khalifa Ghwell is leader of a third rival government, the Government of National Salvation, which has some support from Mufti al-Ghariani. The offensive is the latest in a series of attempts by Ghwell to overthrow the GNA administration in Tripoli.
5. The State Council was formed by the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement as an advisory body to the GNA/Presidency Council and HoR as a third element of the unified government.

This article first appeared in the July 14, 2017 issue of the Jamestown Foundation’s Terrorism Monitor

Posted in Libya, Qatar | Tagged Terrorist List

Jabal ‘Uwaynat: Mysterious Desert Mountain Becomes a Three-Border Security Flashpoint

Posted on June 13, 2017 by McGregor

Andrew McGregor

AIS Special Report, June 13, 2017

Before the advent of motorized desert exploration in the 1930s there were few areas as little known as the Libyan Desert, a vast and largely lifeless wasteland of sand and stone as large as India. In the midst of this forbidden wilderness stands a lonely sentinel, a massive mountain that covers some 600 square miles and rises to a height of 6345 feet, once possibly forming an island in the prehistoric sea that preceded the Saharan sands. Though its springs and rain-pools were known to the Ancient Egyptians, Jabal ‘Uwaynat was eventually forgotten for thousands of years by all but a handful of hardened desert dwellers who sought its fresh water and seasonal grazing. Since its “rediscovery” less than a hundred years ago, possession of this lonely massif has almost led to a war between Italy and Great Britain and is now at the heart of a security crisis involving Libya, Egypt and Sudan, whose borders meet at Jabal ‘Uwaynat.
The Highway to Yam

The ancient importance of Jabal 'Uwaynat is revealed in the rock art at the site depicting cattle, giraffes, lions and human beings, but no camels, which were only introduced into Egypt in roughly 500 BCE. The drawings suggest an occupation in the Neolithic period far earlier than the era of the Ancient Egyptians at a time when water was far more plentiful in the region. [1]

The Inscription of Mentuhotep II at Jabal 'Uwaynat

Though 'Uwaynat was long believed to lie beyond the regions explored by the Ancient Egyptians, the remarkable 2007 discovery of a depiction of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom king Mentuhotep II (11th Dynasty, 21st century BCE) promises to rewrite these perceptions. The portrayal of the seated king was accompanied by his name in a cartouche and an inscription mentioning the land of Yam, known as a destination for Egyptian trade caravans supplying exotic goods from the African interior from as early as the Old Kingdom reign of Merenre I (6th Dynasty, 23rd century BCE). [2] The exact location of Yam has never been determined, but the new evidence suggests it was somewhere south of 'Uwaynat and further west into the African interior than previously thought by many scholars, possibly in Ennedi (modern Chad) or even Darfur (modern Sudan). The precise site of the inscription has been kept secret to avoid the ravages of “adventure tourism” that has led to the damage or destruction of many important Saharan monuments and rock art sites in recent years. [3]

Entering the Modern Era

The great mountain disappeared from the historical record until the early 19th century, when, according to English desert explorer Ralph Bagnold, an Arab from the Libyan oasis of Jalu and a resident at the court of Sultan Muhammad 'Abd al-Karim Sabun of Wadai (1804-1815, modern eastern Chad), undertook to find a new trade route northwards through the Libyan Desert to Benghazi on the Mediterranean coast. The experienced Arab caravan leader, Shehaymah, headed northeast first to the remote springs at Jabal 'Uwaynat, then worked northwest to Kufra and on through Jalu to Benghazi. [4] The fact that Shehaymah headed into this unknown wasteland suggested that he had some prior knowledge of 'Uwaynat. Though this route was used by the Shehaymah and the Wadaians only once, this was the first known reference to the isolated mountain. From that time, caravan routes from Wadai bypassed 'Uwaynat to the west on a more direct route north to the coast, while the famous Darb al-Arba’in caravan route from Darfur to Asyut in Egypt bypassed 'Uwaynat far to the east, letting knowledge of 'Uwaynat's existence fade from all save the Tubu tribesmen of the eastern Sahara whose mastery of the desert and its mysteries was unparalleled.
Nearly 3,000 years after its last known visit by the Egyptians, Jabal 'Uwaynat was finally mapped by another Egyptian, the aristocrat Ahmad Muhammad Hassanein Bey, who “discovered” this “lost oasis” during an extraordinary 2200 mile trek by camel from the Mediterranean port of Sollum (near the Egyptian/Libyan border) to al-Fashir, the capital of Darfur. At the time of Hassanein Bey’s arrival, the mountain was the site of a settlement of some 150 Gura'an Tubu from Ennedi, relatively recent arrivals who did not wish to live under the rule of the French who had recently colonized the Chad region up to the Darfur border. Seven years later, only six remained; three years after that, the Gura'an settlement had disappeared forever. [5]

Two years after Hassanein Bey’s visit, Prince Kamal al-Din Hussein (son of Egypt’s Sultan Husayn Kamel, 1914-1917) visited ‘Uwaynat in a remarkable expedition using French Citroën Kegresse halftracks, supported by immense camel-borne supply convoys. This well-financed motorized journey by halftracks, as temperamental as camels in their own way, marked the beginning of the end of ‘Uwaynat’s ancient isolation.

The legendary English desert explorer Ralph Bagnold reached ‘Uwaynat by motorcar in 1930, inventing the techniques of desert-driving in the process. His atmospheric description of the place is still worth citing:

‘Uwaynat was by no means the flat-topped plateau it had looked from the plain; for the rock was hollowed out by a freak of erosion into spires and pinnacles over a hundred feet in height, separated by winding passages… Wandering through this labyrinth, we came out at unexpected places to the threshold, as it were, of a broken doorway high up in the battlements of some ruined castle, with nothing but a sheer thousand-foot drop beneath. From these openings the enormous yellow plain could be seen, featureless and glaring with reflected sunlight, reaching away and away in all directions (except to the south, where the peak of Kissu many miles distant rose like a lone cathedral) to a vague hazy horizon…
With that little vision came a sudden overwhelming sense of the remoteness of the mountain – as if it included the whole world and was floating by itself, with Kissu peak as its satellite, in a timeless solitude. [6]

In 1931 an Italian expeditionary force under General Rodolfo Graziani crossed the desert to take the oasis of Kufra (northwest of 'Uwaynat), where they defeated a desperate resistance put up by the Zuwaya Arabs. Unsatisfied with his conquest, Graziani (“the Butcher of Libya”) urged his men to pursue the survivors into the desert, attacking refugee families with armored vehicles and aircraft. Many of the refugees headed towards 'Uwaynat, dropping dead daily in large numbers due to lack of food and water. Not knowing the region, some tried to follow the tracks of Prince Kamal’s halftracks, but when these became obliterated by sand and wind there was little hope left. Many of the refugees were rescued by British desert explorer Pat Clayton, who abandoned his survey work in the region to cover some 5,000 total miles of desert in his vehicles ferrying exhausted and dying refugees to safety. His efforts earned him a British medal and a ban from Italian-held Libya.

The British-Italian Struggle over 'Uwaynat

The pursuit of the refugees brought Jabal 'Uwaynat to the attention of the Italians, who sent expeditions to the mountain in 1931 and 1932 with an eye to claiming it for Italy, though it was already claimed by the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan Condominium government. Suddenly this desert massif known to the Europeans for only less than a decade became a site of strategic importance – a base there would bring Italian forces within striking distance of the Aswan Dam (550 miles away) using aircraft or motor vehicles. The Italians busied themselves with naming all the mountain’s prominent features for prominent Italian fascists, but were deeply disappointed to discover Bagnold’s cairn at the highest point of Jabal 'Uwaynat.

In the meantime, both the Italians and the British in the region remained wary of encountering the deadly but phantom-like Gura'an raiders led by the notorious Aramaî Gongoi. These Tubu raiders could cross hundreds of miles of trackless and apparently waterless deserts on their camels without benefit of any kind of navigational equipment before descending on unsuspecting oases or desert convoys. Mystified by these skills, their oasis-dwelling victims even claimed the Gura’an camels left no tracks in the sand.

The British and Italians began sending aircraft and patrols to 'Uwaynat and by 1933 it seemed, incredibly, that Britain and Italy could go to war over possession of a remote place only a select few had ever seen or heard of until that point. Saner heads prevailed in 1934 as diplomats defined the border, giving Italy (and later independent Libya as a result) sovereignty over much of the mountain (including ‘Ain Dua, the most reliable spring) as well as the “Sarra Triangle” to the southwest of the formation in return for Italy abandoning its claims to a large portion of northwest Sudan. These claims had been based on Italy’s view of itself as the sovereign successor to the Ottoman Empire in the region, the Ottomans having once made optimistic but largely unenforceable claims to large tracts of the Saharan interior in the late 19th century.

What the British Foreign Office had overlooked was that Italy had taken control of the remote but valuable Ma'tan al-Sarra well inside the so-called ‘Sarra Triangle.’ The site for the well was chosen in 1898 by the leader of Cyrenaica’s Sanussi religious order, Sayyid Muhammad al-Mahdi al-Sanussi. Al-Sanussi wished to open a new trade route to equatorial Africa from his headquarters in Kufra, but was hindered by the nearly waterless 400 mile stretch between Kufra and the next major well at Tekro (northern Chad). Al-Sanussi said a prayer at the site, roughly mid-way between Kufra and Tekro, and ordered his followers to dig. Months passed with camel convoys ferrying supplies to the workers until they finally found, at a depth of 192 feet, an apparently unlimited supply of water. [7]

Lying two hundred miles west of 'Uwaynat, the strategic value of Ma'tan al-Sarra would be realized by Mu’ammad Qaddafi, who used it as a staging point for a group of Sudanese dissidents and followers of Sadiq al-Mahdi (great-grandson of Muhammad al-Mahdi and two-time
prime minister of Sudan) to launch a 1976 attack on his enemy President Ja’afar Nimieri in Khartoum. The force passed south of ‘Uwaynat but the coup attempt failed after several days of bloody fighting in the Sudanese capital, followed by a wave of executions of captured dissidents and their supporters.

Qaddafi later used the Ma’tan al-Sarra as a forward airbase in his unsuccessful attempt to seize the Aouzou Strip during the Libya-Chad war of 1978-1987. Chad’s largely Tubu army under Hassan Djamous seized the airbase in a devastating lightning raid on September 5, 1987, bringing an effective end to the war with a humiliating Libyan defeat.

‘Uwaynat in the Second World War

As World War II broke out, possession of ‘Uwaynat was contested between the modified Fords and Chevrolets of the Commonwealth Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), invented and commanded by Major Ralph Bagnold, and their motorized Italian counterparts in the Compagnie Sahariane, a largely Libyan force with Italian officers and NCOs. As the war began, Italian forces established posts at the ‘Uwaynat springs of Ain Zwaya and one at ‘Ain Dua, both equipped with airstrips and garrisoned largely by Libyan colonial troops under Italian command.

After the Italians had been driven from the region by British and Free French offensives, the British-led Sudan Defence Force (SDF) used the route past ‘Uwaynat for regular convoys of arms and supplies to the Free French garrison in Kufra. This oasis had been taken by General Philippe Leclerc’s Free French forces with the assistance of the British Commonwealth’s Long-Range Desert Group (LRDG) on March 1, 1941. [8]

When a Libyan National Army-operated SIAI-Marchetti SF.260 light aircraft disappeared in the region in May 2017, it was a reminder that extreme heat and sudden sandstorms can make aerial surveillance of the border region around ‘Uwaynat a perilous undertaking. The aircraft left Kufra airbase to investigate reports of armed Sudanese crossing the border in vehicles. Its pilot and co-pilot were discovered dead the next day (Libya Observer, May 24, 2017).

It was not the first. In 1940, a Bristol Blenheim light bomber being used for reconnaissance by Free French forces was forced down near Jabal ‘Uwaynat. Its crew wandered in the desert for 12 days before being picked up by an Italian patrol and packed off to Italy as prisoners. A second Free French Blenheim went missing on February 5, 1942 after a bombing mission on the Italian-held al-Taj fort at Kufra. The plane and the remains of its crew were discovered by a French patrol in the Ennedi region of Chad in 1959. [9]
A French Patrol Discovers the Lost Blenheim in Ennedi, 1959

Less fortunate were the crews of three South African Air Force Blenheims that became lost in May 1942 and were forced to land in the desert between Kufra and 'Uwaynat when their fuel ran out. Only one man survived to be rescued; the others perishing in agony from heat, thirst and misguided attempts to preserve themselves through drinking the alcohol in their compasses and spraying themselves with blister-inducing foam from their fire-extinguishers. [10]

There are some surprising peculiarities to aerial surveillance in the open desert. Stationary vehicles can be extremely difficult to spot from the air, as patrols from the LRDG discovered while operating in the Libyan Desert in World War II. It became common practice to simply stop when the approach of enemy aircraft was heard, a tactic that saved many patrols no matter how counter-intuitive it might have seemed.

Modern Gateway for Rebels, Traffickers and Mercenaries

In the Qaddafi-era, a trans-Saharan desert road connecting Kufra through 'Uwaynat to Sudanese Darfur was promoted as a means of establishing trade between the two regions. The collapse of security in southern Libya after the 2011 anti-Qaddafi revolution brought the route to the attention of smugglers, human traffickers and members of Darfur’s multiple rebel movements who were being slowly squeezed out of Darfur under pressure from Sudan’s security forces.

A June 1, 2017 report of the UN Libyan Experts Panel described how Darfuri rebel movements received offers for their military services from both rival governments in the Libyan conflict, broadly the Bayda/Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) and its military arm, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA), versus the Tripoli-based Presidency Council/Government of National Accord (GNA) and their allied Islamist militias. Due to a presence in Libya dating back to the Qaddafi-era (when the Libyan leader acted as a sponsor in their war against Khartoum), commanders such as Abdallah Banda, Abdallah Jana and Yahya Omda from Darfur’s largest rebel movement, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), were able to access Libyan networks to their benefit.

Rebel fighters from the rival Sudan Liberation Army – Minni Minnawi (SLA-MM) began operations in Fezzan in 2015 before joining LNA operations in the northern “oil crescent” in 2016. Fighters from another major rebel faction, the Sudan Liberation Army – Abdul Wahid (SLM-AW), were cited as being aligned with the LNA (Libya Herald, June 11, 2017). Through 2014-2015, there were numerous accusations from Haftar and his supporters that Khartoum was using the desert passage past ‘Uwaynat to send arms and fighters to reinforce Islamist militias in Benghazi, Kufra and elsewhere, resulting in a short diplomatic crisis. [11] Haftar recently claimed Qatar was funding the entry of Chadian and Sudanese “mercenaries” into Libya through the southern border (al-Arabiya, May 29, 2017).

Some 30 members of JEM, allegedly supported by Tubu fighters, were reported killed in two days of fighting north of Kufra in February 2016 (Reuters, February 5, 2016; Libya Observer, February 4, 2016; Libya Prospect, February 7, 2016). Some of the fighting took place at Buzaymah Oasis, 130 km northwest of Kufra, where the Darfuri rebels had attempted to set up a base. The Darfuris were attacked by Kufra’s Subul al-Salam Brigade, a Salafist militia formed in October 2015 and composed largely of Zuwaya Arabs, the dominant group in the Kufra region. Led by Abd al-Rahman Hashim al-Kilani, the militia was allied with Khalifa Haftar, who is reported to have supplied the unit with 40 armored Toyota 4x4s in September 2016 (Libya Herald, October 20, 2016). After a number of kidnappings and highway robberies committed by the alleged JEM fighters, the Subul al-Salam group again engaged the Darfuris in October 2016, killing 13 fighters. An October 23, 2016 Sudanese government statement claimed the Darfuris were supporters of Khalifa Haftar. [12] Subul al-Salam also clashed with Chadian gunmen 400 km south of Kufra on February 2, 2017, killing four of the Chadians, possibly Tubu from the Ennedi mountain range south of the border (Libya Observer, February 2, 2017).
A May 2017 Sudanese intelligence report repeated nearly year-old claims that elements of the Darfuri Sudan Liberation Movement – Minni Minawi (SLM-MM) under local commander Jabir Ishag were active in the Libyan south around Rabaniyah and around the oil fields north of Kufra. The report also claimed the presence of SLM-Unity and SLM-Abd al-Wahid (SLM-AW) units northeast of Kufra and JEM forces under commander al-Tahir Arja in the north, near Tobruk, where they were alleged to be supporting Khalifa Haftar (Sudan Media Center, May 22, 2017; Libya Observer, October 10, 2016; GMS-Sudan, July 27, 2016).

Sudan’s Rapid Support Forces Deploy at ’Uwaynat

Sudanese troops were reported to have moved up to the Jabal ’Uwaynat region on June 2, 2017 (Libyan Express, June 3, 2017). Most of these were likely to belong to Sudan’s Rapid Support Forces (RSF – Quwat al-Da’im al-Seri), a 30,000 strong paramilitary that was integrated into the Sudanese Army in January 2017. Prior to that, the paramilitary had operated under the command of the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS – Jiha’az al-Amn al-Watani wa’l-Mukhabarat) and became notorious for the indiscipline and human rights abuses common to the infamous Janjaweed, from which much of the strength of the RSF was drawn at the time of its creation in 2013. The disorderly RSF has even been known to clash with units of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF).

Besides recruitment from a variety of Arab and non-Arab tribes in Darfur, the RSF also employs many Arabs from Chad, former rebels against the Zaghawa-dominated regime of President Idriss Déby Itno. Designed for high mobility, the RSF claims it can reach the Libyan border within 24 hours of an order for deployment (Sudan Tribune, January 17, 2017). [13] The RSF leader is Lieutenant General Muhammad Hamdan Daglo (a.k.a. Hemeti), a member of the Mahariya branch of the Darfur Rizayqat. The RSF enjoys the patronage of Sudanese vice-president Hassabo Abd al-Rahman, who is, like Daglo, a member of the Mahariya branch of the Rizayqat. Hemeti is nonetheless despised by many SAF officers as an illiterate with nothing more than a Quran school education (Radio Dabanga, June 4, 2014).

A June-July 2016 deployment of the RSF in the ’Uwaynat region led to the arrest of roughly 600 Eritrean and Ethiopian illegal migrants, most of whom were attempting to reach Europe or the United States. The RSF activity was in step with a European Union grant of €100 million to deal with illegal migration that followed a Sudanese pledge to help stop human trafficking to Europe (Sudan Tribune, July 31, 2016). The funds were intended to construct two detention camps for migrants and to provide Sudanese security services with electronic means of registering illegal migrants. The traffickers, however, do not always go quietly; in April 2017 the RSF engaged in “fierce clashes” with human traffickers, leading to the arrest of five of their leaders and the capture of six 4×4 vehicles. According to one smuggler of migrants, the presence of the RSF has changed the situation on the border: “The road to Libya is still working, but it’s very dangerous” (The Economist, May 25, 2017).

The RSF commander has suggested Europe does not appreciate the RSF’s efforts in fighting illegal migration on their behalf, stating that despite a loss of 25 killed, 315 injured and 150 vehicles in the fight against illegal migration, “nobody even thanked us” (Sudan Tribune, August 31, 2016). Daglo went on to warn his troops could easily abandon their positions and allow the migrants and traffickers free passage. Whether Daglo was speaking for the government or on his own behalf is uncertain.
RSF commander Muhammad Hamdan Daglo “Hemeti”

Only days after Daglo’s complaints, Yasir Arman, secretary-general of the rebel Sudan People’s Liberation Army/Movement–North (SPLA/M-N), claimed to have received details of a European operation to directly supply the controversial RSF with funds and logistical support. Arman maintained that this “Satanic plan” was intended to cover up the RSF’s participation in atrocities and genocide. The EU issued a prompt denial (Sudan Tribune, September 7, 2016). [14]

Rising Tensions between Egypt and Sudan

Egypt’s army has been engaged in a constant effort to prevent Libyan arms crossing its 1000 km border with Libya, the preferred route being to cross the border through the Libyan Desert and then on to the Bahariya Oasis in Western Egypt, connected by road with the Nile Valley. In late May 2017, Egypt’s president Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi announced that Egypt’s military had destroyed some 300 vehicles carrying arms across the Libyan border in the last two months alone (Ahram Online, May 25, 2017).

Last October, LNA chief-of-staff and HoR-appointed military governor of the eastern region, Abd al-Raziq al-Nathory, announced that Egyptian forces guarding the border with Libya had in some cases established positions as far as 40 km inside Libya ( Libyan Express, October 15, 2016).

The issue of Darfur rebel groups entering Sudan from Libya, the possible establishment of a buffer zone on the border triangle between Egypt, Libya and Sudan, and a Sudanese proposal to create a joint border patrol force were addressed in a meeting between the Sudanese and Egyptian foreign ministers in Cairo on June 3, 2017 (Sudan Tribune, June 3, 2017). Tensions between Egypt and Sudan have flared up in recent weeks with new friction over the disputed status of the Halayib Triangle west of the Red Sea coast, Khartoum’s support for Ethiopia’s Renaissance Dam construction (which Egypt claims will violate long-standing Nile Basin water-sharing agreements) and accusations from Khartoum of Egyptian material support for Darfuri rebels re-entering Sudan. Less than two weeks before the meeting, Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir announced that the RSF had seized Egyptian armored vehicles used by Darfuri rebels crossing the border near ‘Uwaynat from Libya, while Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and NISS Facebook pages posted photos of captured or destroyed Egyptian vehicles allegedly used by the rebels (Sudan Tribune, May 24, 2017).

Conclusion: From Isolation to Insecurity

Jabal ‘Uwaynat’s magnificent isolation is quickly becoming a romantic memory. Today it has become a focal point for modern scourges such as human-trafficking, narcotics smuggling and militancy-for-hire. Its apparent future is one of more frequent clashes, greater surveillance and the introduction of more imposing barriers to movement. To some degree, this undesirable future can be averted if Libya’s political house can be put in order in the near future, thereby reducing the demand for foreign guns-for-hire, enabling the imposition of proper border controls to deter human-trafficking and allowing the introduction of more effective cooperative security efforts between Libyan, Sudanese and Egyptian security services.

Notes


3. For example, the roughly 7,000 year-old Nabta Playa stone circle (northwest of Abu Simbel in Egypt’s Western Desert) has been subject to pointless damage, theft and even re-arrangement by unauthorized “New Age” tourists to better correspond to their own theories regarding its purpose. Rubbish dumps around the site attest to the thoughtlessness of these visitors and their unlicensed guides.


8. For the SDF convoys on this route in WWII, see “The Kufra Convoys,” [http://www.fjexpeditions.com/frameset/convoys.htm](http://www.fjexpeditions.com/frameset/convoys.htm)


10. See [http://www.fjexpeditions.com/frameset/convoys.htm](http://www.fjexpeditions.com/frameset/convoys.htm)


Libya’s Military Wild Card: The Benghazi Defense Brigades and the Massacre at Brak al-Shatti

**Posted on June 2, 2017 by McGregor**

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**June 2, 2017**

*Insignia of the Benghazi Defense Brigades*

In shocking events on May 18, fighters in southern Libya carried out a massacre, slaughtering more than 140 soldiers and civilians, most of whom had already surrendered. The attack was carried out by a militia from the Libyan city of Misrata and their allies, the Benghazi Defense Brigades (BDB, *Saraya Difaa al-Bengazhi*), a politically enigmatic military coalition that claims it is anti-terrorist in nature while consistently being described as terrorist by its enemies. [1]

Founded on June 1, 2016, the BDB alliance combines professional soldiers, ex-policemen and a significant number of Islamist mujahideen expelled from Benghazi by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA). The BDB describes itself not as an Islamist coalition, but as a group of *thuwar* (revolutionary fighters) and soldiers who oppose Haftar’s “oppressive” militias in their fight “for
liberty, freedom and the safe return to our city [Benghazi] with our displaced families," while combatting terrorism “in all its shapes and forms” (Libya Herald, April 19). [2]

Political Background

Understanding the BDB’s activities first requires some familiarity with Libya’s fractious administration. Libya’s unity government, as determined by the UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) of December 17, 2015, has devolved into a number of rival parts, including:

- The Government of National Accord (GNA), the Tripoli-based executive authority, which includes the internally divided but largely Islamist nine-member Presidency Council, the chairman of which is Fayez al-Serraj. It oversees the functions of the head-of-state and is intended to have authority over a yet-to-be formed national military. In the meantime, the GNA is supported by powerful militias from the city of Misrata.
- The Bayda/Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR), the legislative authority controlled by Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thinni. The HoR resists the authority of the Presidency Council and has refused to transfer responsibility for the armed forces to Tripoli, endorsing instead a collection of mainly Cyrenaican militias referred to as the Libyan National Army (LNA). This force is led by Khalifa Haftar, who is broadly anti-Islamist but nonetheless includes Saudi-backed Salafist “Madkhali” fighters in his coalition.
- The High Council of State, a Tripoli-based consultative body led by Abd al-Rahman Swehli, which functions independently of the GNA.

The GNA is also challenged by the so-called “Government of National Salvation” (GNS), the Tripoli-based remains of the pre-LPA General National Council (GNC), a parliament formerly led by Misratan Khalifa al-Ghwell. The ex-PM has attempted to overturn the authority of the UN-recognized GNA, but the GNS does not control any institutions of importance.

The BDB are the avowed enemy of “Field Marshal” Haftar, regularly described in BDB statements as a “war criminal.” Given Haftar is the commander of a regional militia, his absurd rank (which he was awarded by HoR parliamentarians in 2016) reflects his posturing as a new Libyan strongman who believes he alone is capable of uniting the shattered nation. Haftar is opposed by many Misratans due to his past as a Gaddafi-era general, his long association with the CIA while living as an exile in Alexandria, Virginia, and his battle to subdue Misratan influence in Benghazi and elsewhere.

Affiliation to Dar al-Ifta and the Grand Mufti

The BDB’s Statement no.19 declared the group had “no party, political or ideological affiliations” (Libya Herald, March 12; al-Jazeera TV via BBC Monitoring, March 12). Despite this, the movement has pledged loyalty to controversial Tripoli-based Libyan Grand Mufti Sadiq al-Ghariani and claims to operate under his authority and that of the Dar al-Ifta, Libya's fatwa-issuing authority.

Despite his status as Libya’s leading cleric and recognition by the GNA and the Presidency Council, al-Ghariani is in practice a divisive influence whose leadership has already been rejected by the HoR. Al-Ghariani is opposed to any political settlement involving Haftar and condemned a recent reconciliation meeting in Cairo between the field marshal and al-Serraj, the Presidency Council chairman.

In May 2016, the Mufti surprised many by urging all “revolutionaries” to abandon the fight against Islamic State (IS) forces in Sirte to instead concentrate their forces against the LNA in eastern Libya, claiming IS in Libya would collapse once Haftar was defeated (Al-Tanasuh TV, May 11, 2016, via BBC Monitoring).

BDB leader Brigadier General Mustafa al-Sharkasi declared last year that his fighters were “not ashamed to say we use the Dar al-Ifta as our reference … When we are victorious in the city of Benghazi, we will revert to Islamic reference in our dealing with the people …” (al-Nabaa TV/Twitter, via BBC Monitoring, June 21, 2016).

LNA spokesman Colonel Ahmad Mismari has repeatedly claimed that the BDB are supplied with weapons and vehicles by Qatar and Turkey (viewed as sympathetic to Islamist forces) in violation of the international arms embargo on Libya (Libya Herald, March 3).

The BDB’s allegiance to al-Ghariani and the Dar al-Ifta has created friction with other groups in the capital. A BDB camp in the Suq al-Jama district of Tripoli was attacked on November 30, 2016 by RADA (“Deterrence”) forces led by Abd al-Raouf Kara, a pro-GNA militia strongly opposed to the Grand Mufti (Libya Herald, December 1, 2016). The BDB are also believed to have contacts with GNS leader Khalifa Ghwell (Libya Herald, March 3).

BDB Leadership
The BDB leadership includes the following individuals:

**Brigadier General Mustafa al-Sharkasi**, a professional soldier, has emerged as the dominant commander in the BDB. Al-Sharkasi served as an Air Force colonel at Benina airbase, 19 kilometers (km) east of Benghazi, under the regime of Muammar Gaddafi. Turning against the regime, he acted as a militia commander in Misrata during the revolution. Once part of Haftar’s LNA, he is now bitterly opposed to him (Libya Herald, November 13, 2016).

**Ziyad Belam**, sometimes cited as the BDB leader, is the former commander of Benghazi’s Omar al-Mukhtar Brigade and leader of the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shurah Council (BRSC), an alliance of Benghazi-based Islamist militias that once included local IS fighters. He was seriously wounded in an assassination attempt in October 2014.

**Al-Sa’adi al-Nawfali** is the leader of the Operations Room for the Liberation of the Cities of Ajdabiya and Support for the Revolutionaries of Benghazi (known by its Arabic acronym GATMJB). This group cooperates with the BDB, allowing al-Nawfali to hold leadership positions in both organizations. Al-Nawfali appeared in a 2014 video with al-Murabitun commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar (AgenziaNova.com, June 20, 2016). He has been variously described as a former Ansar al-Sharia commander in Ajdabiya and a supporter of Islamic State forces in Nawfaliyah.

**Ismail Muhammad al-Salabi** was a commander in the Rafallah Sahati militia and is the brother of prominent Libyan Muslim Brotherhood member Ali Muhammad al-Salabi. Ismail is an associate of GNA Defense Minister Colonel Mahdi al-Barghathi, formerly chief of military police in Benghazi and a former LNA armored unit commander.

**Osama al-Jadhran** is the Ajdabiya-based brother of former Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) commander Ibrahim al-Jadhran. An Islamist who was tortured during imprisonment in the Gaddafi era at the notorious Abu Salim prison, Osama took a prominent part in the BDB’s March 2017 capture of Ras Lanuf airport.

**Ahmad al-Tajuri** is an artillery commander from the Tajuri district of Benghazi and former leader of the BRSC.

**Faraj Shaku** is a commander of the February 17 Martyrs’ Brigade and a former BSRC commander.

**Mahmoud al-Fitouri** is a senior commander in the BDB.

The main force of the BDB is based in Jufra (south-central Libya). Its communications are handled by its official media establishment, Bushra Media.

**Operation ‘Volcano of Wrath’**

The BDB launched its first offensive on Ajdabiya, 15 km southwest of Benghazi, on June 18, 2016, together with local forces in the city opposed to the LNA. Describing the BDB as part of IS, a Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) spokesman said that the PFG was fighting the BDB in Ajdabiya under the guidance of the GNA’s ministry of defense (Libya Herald, June 25, 2016). Shortly after the attack on Ajdabiya, Brigadier al-Sharkasi declared that the BDB was on its way to Benghazi to “liberate it from these criminals, these people that have broken out of prison, these militias, the gangs of Haftar” (al-Nabaa TV/Twitter, via BBC Monitoring, June 21, 2016).

On July 11, 2016, the BDB announced the commencement of Operation “Volcano of Wrath,” intended to break the LNA’s siege of Benghazi and allow displaced residents to return (Bushra News/Twitter, via BBC Monitoring, July 17, 2016).
The BDB’s offensive ultimately stalled outside of Benghazi, but not before it claimed to have shot down a helicopter containing three members of the French Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure (DGSE, Directorate General for External Security) operating in support of the LNA defenders (Bushra News/Twitter via BBC Monitoring, July 17, 2016; ChannelsTV.com, February 3). Three days later, the BDB claimed a French “retaliatory” airstrike on BDB positions in western Benghazi had killed 13 of their fighters (Libyan Express, July 20, 2016). Al-Sharkasi later blamed the BDB’s failure to enter Benghazi on the intervention of “foreign” warplanes (al-Jazeera TV via BBC Monitoring, March 12).

Failed Attack on Sidra and Ras Lanuf

In December 2016, the BDB joined former members of the BRSC and some members of Ibrahim Jadhran’s PFG in a disastrous attempt to take the important oil terminals at Sidra and Ras Lanuf. The facilities had been wrested from the PFG by the LNA in September 2016. Operating under the unified command of the “Oil Ports and Fields Liberation Room,” an armed group of 600 to 800 men left Jufra in a convoy for the ports in Libya’s vital “oil crescent” west of Benghazi, where they were repulsed by stronger LNA forces (ICG, December 14, 2016).

The LNA responded with airstrikes on BDB positions on the Jufra airbase, killing BDB spokesman Mansur al-Faydi, PFG commander Moussa Bouain al-Moghrabi and BDB commander Ahmad al-Shaltami, a former member of Benghazi’s Ansar al-Sharia (Libya Herald, December 12, 2016). Brigadier Idris Musa Bughuetin and Colonel Osama al-Ubaydi, two officers close to Mahdi al-Barghathi, the GNA defense minister, were captured by the LNA (Eyeonisisinlibya.com, December 13, 2016).

This led to questions regarding the alleged role of the GNA’s defense ministry in preparing and even ordering the failed offensive. Some verification of these allegations appeared to come through a tweet showing captured vehicles that clearly bore the markings of the ministry’s 12th Brigade (Twitter, December 7, 2016).

UAE AT-802

On February 9, 2017, aircraft believed to belong to either the LNA or to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which backs Haftar, struck BDB positions at the Jufra airbase, killing two people and wounding 13 others (Libya Herald, February 9). The UAE uses al-Khadim airbase in Marj province for operations by AT-802 light attack aircraft and surveillance drones (Jane’s 360, October 28, 2016). The AT-802’s are reportedly flown by American private contractors working for former Blackwater CEO Erik Prince on behalf of the UAE (Intelligence Online, January 11).

Three days later, a BDB statement called for “a general mobilization by all of Libya’s honorable revolutionaries, officers and soldiers” against Haftar’s LNA and mercenary fighters of Darfur’s Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), who they claimed were fighting alongside the LNA (al-Jazeera TV via BBC Monitoring, February 12).

Operation ‘Return to Benghazi’

The mobilization led to the BDB’s seizure of the oil terminals at Sidra and Ras Lanuf from the LNA with a surprise attack on March 3. The BDB was able to catch the LNA off guard by moving its forces forward in small groups of two or three vehicles before concentrating its forces just outside the ports (Libya Herald, March 3). An LNA spokesman said the BDB’s success was due in part to its use of sophisticated jamming equipment that interfered with LNA communications (Libya Herald, March 6). There were reports that Defense Minister al-Barghathi had again ordered the defense ministry’s 12th Brigade to support the BDB offensive (Libya Herald, March 7). There were also unconfirmed reports that the BDB had beheaded two NCOs of the LNA’s 131st Infantry Battalion taken prisoner during the
The offensive was supported by demonstrations in Tripoli and Misrata, while the Grand Mufti used a television address to urge residents of eastern Libya to join the BDB’s march on Benghazi (Libya Observer, March 3). After taking Ras Lanuf Airport, a BDB statement insisted that control of the oil ports was not the aim of the operation, but was only a step in assisting internally displaced persons (IDPs) forced from Benghazi by the LNA (Libya Herald, March 3).

The LNA succeeded in holding the line east of the terminals at al-Uqaylah with the help of Tubu reinforcements from southern Libya, leaving some 170 km of Libya’s coastline in the hands of the BDB (Libya Herald, March 6).

In the days following, the Brigades repelled successive attempts by the LNA’s 152 Battalion to expel them. Airstrikes, believed to be carried out by Egyptian warplanes, targeted BDB positions in the oil crescent, but the failure of Haftar’s LNA created a small crisis in relations with Cairo, with urgent pleas for greater support against the BDB “terrorists” (Libya Herald, March 13). Haftar advisor Abd al-Basset al-Badri was also dispatched to Moscow to ask for greater Russian support in the fight against the BDB (Libya Herald, March 14).

The oil terminals were handed over to Brigadier Idris Bukhamada, an ally of Defense Minister al-Barghathi. Bukhamada was appointed head of the PFG in February 2017 by the Presidency Council to replace Ibrahim Jadhran, who was seized by a militia in Nalut in March. The LNA was incensed that their own candidate for PFG chief, Brigadier Muftah al-Magarief, was left out in the cold (Libya Herald, March 8).

During the orderly BDB withdrawal, the LNA’s Colonel al-Mismari announced, “the terrorist gangs of al-Qaeda [i.e. the BDB] are fleeing Ras Lanuf” (Facebook via BBC Monitoring, March 7). Al-Mismari also accused the Presidency Council of hosting secret meetings with al-Qaeda leaders to fund and support the BDB’s operations in the oil crescent (Libya Observer, March 7; Middle East Observer, March 7).

The LNA spokesperson’s accusations appear to be part of a larger campaign intended to portray Haftar’s political enemies as radical Islamists with close connections to al-Qaeda and/or IS in order to rally international support for his own militia.

A Presidency Council statement condemning the seizure of the oil crescent by the BDB was in turn rejected by two Islamist members of the council — Abd al-Salam Kajman (of the Muslim Brotherhood) and Muhammad al-Amari — who instead offered their support to the “revolutionaries” (Twitter, March 3; Libya Herald, March 6).

The BDB, meanwhile, considered its turnover of Sidra and Ras Lanuf should be seen as proof it was part of a broad-based solution to the Libyan conflict exclusive of al-Qaeda or other extremist groups. Unlike the jihadists, the BDB has attempted to interact with the traditional enemies of the extremists, urging Egypt to play a “positive role” and stating its approval of Italy’s stance on Libya. According to BDB commander Mahmoud al-Fitouri: “We are partners to the international community in fighting terrorism; we will never allow terrorist groups to deploy in the region” (Libya Observer, March 9).

**Massacre at Brak al-Shatti**

In December 2016, the LNA’s 12th Brigade took Brak al-Shatti airbase, 900 km south of Tripoli and 60 km north of the city of Sabha in Libya’s southwest. The move came after the pro-GNA Misratan Third Force militia was forced to withdraw, providing the LNA with a useful base for operations in the Fezzan, a region where it had had little influence up to that point.

A priority target was the Third Force-held Tamenhint airbase outside of Sabha. Attacks on Tamenhint began in January, when the LNA’s 12th Brigade (largely Magarha, Qaddadfa and Tubu, not to be confused with the GNA’s 12th Brigade) under General Muhammad Ben Nayel arrived at Brak al-Shatti.
To put an end to these attacks, the BDB and the defense ministry’s 13th Brigade (the re-named Misratan “Third Force”) commanded by Colonel Jamal al-Treiki launched a surprise assault on Brak al-Shatti at 9:30am on May 18, driving most of the garrison into the desert. The assault was apparently timed to coincide with the ill-advised withdrawal of much of the LNA’s 12th Brigade to the town of Tukrah (northeast of Benghazi) for a celebration of the third anniversary of Khalifa Haftar’s “Operation Dignity.”

As many as 141 men were executed — their throats slit, or by a single bullet to the head — after the airbase was captured, including fighters of the LNA’s 10th and 12th Brigades and seven civilian truck drivers delivering rations to the base (Libya Herald, May 18; Libya Herald, May 19).

Local hospital officials told Human Rights Watch that nearly all military personnel delivered to the hospital had received a bullet wound to the front of the head. Others arrived still bound and some had injuries consistent with having their heads run over by a vehicle. No LNA wounded arrived at the hospital and there were no casualties from the attackers, suggesting the airbase had been quickly overrun with little resistance. Survivors and videos indicated the LNA prisoners were verbally abused before being killed as “apostates, enemies of God, mercenaries of Haftar and dogs of Haftar” (Human Rights Watch, May 21). General Ben Nayel’s nephew, Ali Ibrahim Ben Nayel, was among those reported killed in the attack (Libya Herald, May 18). After the massacre, the assailants withdrew to their base in Jufra, allowing escaped elements of the 12th Brigade to return along with LNA reinforcements.

Even though the Misratan 13th Brigade falls under the ultimate authority of the UN-backed Presidency Council, that body insisted it had no role in the attack (Libya Herald, May 19). The Council suspended Mahdi al-Barghathi as defense minister on May 19 pending an investigation. The Council also suspended the Third Force/13th Brigade commander, Colonel al-Treiki, though the Council has little effective authority over the Misratan militia (Libya Observer, May 20). No measures were taken against the BDB, which operates outside of GNA control.

On May 19, the 13th Brigade warned the Presidency Council to “reconsider” its statements rejecting responsibility for “the cleansing of the Brak airbase of Islamic State members,” claiming they had documentary proof they had operated on the direct orders of the defense minister and the Presidency Council (Facebook, via BBC Monitoring, May 19). The reference to IS was unexplainable; there was no possibility the garrison at Brak al-Shatti could have been mistaken for IS terrorists.
Ahmad al-Hasnawi

The LNA’s Colonel al-Mismari claimed the attack was planned and led by Islamist Libyan Shield Southern District commander Ahmad Abd al-Jalil al-Hasnawi (Libya Herald, May 19; Channel TV [Amman], May 22, via BBC Monitoring). Al-Hasnawi, a GNA loyalist, led members of his Hasawna tribe into Tamenhint airbase on April 15 to support the Misratan Third Force (Jihadology.net, April 19).

According to the LNA’s 12th Brigade, a number of foreign prisoners were taken following the action, including a Palestinian, a Chadian and two Malians. A unit spokesman said 70 percent of the fighters they had killed or taken prisoner were foreign nationals, adding: “We are convinced we are fighting al-Qaeda” (Libya Herald, May 20).

Libyan MiG-23 “Flogger” (Wings Palette)

LNA retaliation for the massacre came on May 21 in the form of multiple airstrikes by LNA MiG-23 “Floggers” on BDB facilities at Jufra airbase, civilian targets in the city of Hun (the capital of Jufra district) and bases of Misratan militias that had previously fought IS in Sirte (Libyan Express, May 21; Libya Observer, May 21; Libya Observer, May 23; Libya Observer, May 24).

The LNA spokesman claimed the targets in Jufra belonged to al-Qaeda. He also announced the expulsion from Sabha of Humat Libya, a local militia that he claimed, on the basis of interrogations of “foreign fighters,” had participated in the slaughter at Brak al-Shatti (Libya Herald, May 23).

Though securing Tamenhint was given as the reason for the assault on Brak al-Shatti, the LNA announced on May 25 that the Misratan militia had withdrawn from the airbase, leaving it to be taken by the LNA’s 12th Brigade with support from the 116th Brigade (Libya Herald, May 25).

Dangerous and Unpredictable

IS-style atrocities are hard to reconcile with the BDB’s occasional efforts to engage responsibly with internal and international partners in Libya’s ongoing political process.

The BDB is more of a military coalition than a cohesive political movement under a single command and is thus subject to internal differences and dissolution or expansion at any time, particularly in Libya’s current over-heated political climate in which personal differences can lead to command ruptures overnight. The complex mix of leaders and fighters comprising the BDB almost ensures the improbability of defining a specific ideology guiding the coalition, other than a shared hatred of Haftar’s authoritarianism and a determination that the field marshal will never play a role in Libya’s political or military future.

Acting outside the control of any of Libya’s rival political institutions, the BDB has become a dangerous and unpredictable wild-card in the political process. The brutal attack on Brak al-Shatti effectively derailed some of the most promising steps taken towards political reconciliation in Libya.

Rather than being reined in by more responsible armed elements supporting the GNA, the BDB appears to have entered a military alliance with the powerful Misratan Third Force/13th Brigade with the unauthorized support and approval of elements in the GNA’s defense ministry.

The BDB has strayed far from its initial mission of “liberating” Benghazi from Haftar’s control, and the LNA’s penetration of the Fezzan has provided the BDB with new battlefields, possibly as a proxy for external anti-Haftar actors such as Turkey and Qatar.

Until the BDB is either eliminated or brought under effective control by one of the recognized political factions in Libya, it will retain the capacity to disrupt diplomatic efforts to arrive at a much-needed political solution to Libya’s internal chaos.

NOTES

[1] The terms “brigade” and “battalion” are often used interchangeably when referring to Libyan militias, which rarely if ever equal the approximately 4,000 men in three battalions that form a typical US army brigade. The actual size of any unit may fluctuate on a continual basis according to military and political fortunes.
Thuwar, or “revolutionaries,” as used by the BDB and their allies, usually refers to Islamist militias opposed to Khalifa Haftar and the LNA. Radical Islamist jihadists rejecting the political process in its entirety tend to refer to themselves and their allies as “mujahideen.” The distinction is important in defining how the BDB see themselves in the context of the Libyan conflict.

This article was originally published in the June 2, 2017 issue of the Jamestown Foundation’s Terrorism Monitor.

Radical Loyalty and the Libyan Crisis: A Profile of Salafist Shaykh Rabi’ bin Hadi al-Madkhali

Posted on January 19, 2017 by McGregor

January 19, 2017

Advocating loyalty to the regime may seem a rather uncontroversial and unprovocative stance in most instances. However, one influential Saudi shaykh, Rabi’ bin Hadi al-Madkhali, has taken this position to such extremes that many of his fellow Salafists regard him as a radical dangerously out of touch with the practice of the Salafist manhaj (method). Though his importance has declined in his homeland, his message of eternal loyalty to the ruler has gained him the support of individuals and certain governments throughout the Islamic world and beyond. In Libya, especially, we may be witnessing the militarization of a movement once best known for its quietist approach to politics.

Early Years and Education

The future preacher was born in the village of Jaradiya in Saudi Arabia’s southwestern Jazan region in 1931. His birth made him a member of the Mudakhala tribe, part of the larger Banu Shabil confederation. The boy’s father died before Rabi’ was two and a paternal uncle gave the boy guidance. From the age of eight, al-Madkhali studied Islam locally before attending the newly-opened Islamic University of Madina in 1960. Graduating in 1964, al-Madkhali then pursued a Master’s degree in hadith studies (1977), followed by a doctorate at the University of Umm al-Qurra in Mecca (1980) that allowed him to take up a full professorship at the Islamic University of Madina. [1]

The Birth of Madkhalism

Al-Madkhali’s strong opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood emerged in 1984 at a time when Egypt’s Brothers were beginning to engage in parliamentary politics by running candidates under the banner of the centrist and secular New Wafd Party (the experiment was largely rejected by the voters and was not repeated). Initially, al-Madkhali was also reluctant to embrace the Saudi rulers, but by the early 1990s he became a firm exponent of the Islamic legitimacy of the Wali al-Amr (“Guardian,” or “One vested with authority,” i.e. the ruler). In practice this meant he and his followers were stepping back from political engagement in favor of improving Islamic observance amongst the people.

Madkhalism as it has evolved calls for unquestioning loyalty to governments, even those that use extreme and unjustified violence against their subjects so long as they do not commit clear acts of infidelity. This extreme position separates the group from other Salafist movements who draw line at unjustified violence inflicted upon Muslims. However, like most Salafist movements, Madkhalism rejects participation in multi-party democracy on the grounds that it inspires loyalty to individuals and organizations rather than to God.

The Saudi royal family took notice, and in the years following the First Gulf War, al-Madkhali’s doctrine brought him financial support from the Saudi government, which wished to have his movement to weaken the growing Sahwa movement (opposed to the American military presence in the Kingdom, which al-Madkhali defended) and to discredit the emerging Salafi-Jihadist movement. [2]

Al-Madkhali was among half a dozen religious scholars who were asked to supply fatwa-s in support of the Muslim Jihad in eastern Indonesia’s Maluku Province (1999-2002). The scholar ruled that the jihad was individually obligatory for Muslims as they were allegedly under attack by Christians. [3]

Al-Madkhali’s movement takes an aggressive ideological stance towards other interpretations of Salafism. Al-Madkhali’s following has been described as similar to a cult in its demands for members to offer unquestioning obedience to its clerics. Similar to certain religious cults, al-Madkhali’s followers spend a disproportionate amount of time refuting criticisms of their leader or his more controversial works, usually by deploying a broad collection of positive remarks or reviews from members of the Saudi religious establishment as evidence of his legitimacy. [4]
Most of the scholar’s 30+ books concern hadith studies and have been received favorably by much of Saudi Arabia’s Salafist establishment, including hadith specialist Shaykh Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani. [5] Al-Madkhali studied under al-Albani in the 1980s but in recent years the latter has displayed a preference for Salafi scholars more radical than al-Madkhali. [6] Other leading members of the Saudi religious establishment have backed away from support of the preacher in recent years, contributing to the decline of the movement within the Kingdom.

The Spread of Madkhalism

Even as Madkhalism declined in influence in Saudi Arabia, the movement began to spread to Europe (particularly the Netherlands), Southeast Asia, Kuwait, Kazakhstan, Libya and Egypt (where the government promotes it as a Salafist alternative to Salafi-Jihadism). In Europe, the Madkhalists have little interaction with their host communities, preferring to avoid the temptations of Western life or attempts to convert European Christians. Followers are closely monitored for ideological conformity and are encouraged to read only pre-approved texts. Ideological competitors are likewise watched so that any refutation of Madkhalism on theological grounds can be quickly addressed by the scholar’s followers. Members of the movement typically refer to their Muslim opponents as Kharajites (Arabic: khawarij, “outsiders,” a seventh century Islamic movement that opposed the manner of succession in the early Caliphate and were known for their habit of declaring their opponents apostates to Islam, the practice of takfir).

Al-Madkhali has a habit of referring to Salafi-Jihadists solely as “Qutbists” to deny their legitimacy as Salafists. The term refers to the late Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leader Sayyid al-Qutb, who was executed in 1966 for plotting the assassination of General Gamal Abd al-Nasser and the Islamist overthrow of the Egyptian government. Al-Madkhali has repeatedly targeted Qutbist ideology in sermons and books such as Spreading the Light on the Creed and Ideology of Sayyid Qutb, The Abuses of Sayyid Qutb against the Companions of the Messenger of Allah and Protection from the Dangers that are found in the Books of Sayyid Qutb. [7] Unsurprisingly, the jihadists regard the preacher as an enemy. Al-Madkhali has been attacked repeatedly by Abu Qatada al-Filistini, an important al-Qaeda leader now resident in Jordan. Abu Qatada accuses the “so-called Salafi” of spying on jihadis for the Saudi government. [8]

To promote his message, al-Madkhali maintains a website that deals with a range of Islamic issues, ranging from tricky theological debates to rulings on whether it is permissible to take one’s maid on pilgrimage. [9] He and his followers are also active in social media. [10]

The Salafi community in Kuwait began to split in the 1980s when Salafists belonging to Jamaat Ihya al-Turath al-Islami (Revival of Islamic Heritage Society – RIHS, a Kuwaiti Salafi umbrella group) began to participate in the political process. Madkhalism, with its strict opposition to political participation, offered an acceptable ideology for these Salafists and has grown in popularity. [11] Madkhalism is one of several Salafist sects to take root in western Kazakhstan in recent years, though wary authorities tend to lump it together with more radical Salafist groups. [12]
Shaykh Muhammad Sa'id Raslan

In Egypt, al-Madkhali’s most prominent follower is Shaykh Muhammad Sa’id Raslan, a well-known former Muslim Brother who is now an opponent of the Brotherhood and party politics in general. Armed with a Ph.D. in hadith studies and strongly influenced by the controversial teachings of mediaeval preacher Ibn Taymiya (a staple for non-political Salafists and Salafi-Jihadists alike), Raslan has devoted himself, like al-Madkhali, to refuting the works of Sayyid Qutb. Raslan advocates political quietism within Egypt, though he may be taking a more aggressive approach in neighboring Libya (as seen below).

The Shaykh’s opponents are many however, and typically describe Madkhalism as “mental illness,” “fake Salafism” or *bid’ah* (innovation in religion, a serious transgression in Salafist Islam). [13] Detractors claim that submissiveness to the *Wali al-Amr* as prescribed by the Madkhalists produces passivity, submission to injustice and indifference to the suffering of fellow Muslims.

The Madkhalists in Libya

One common practice in man’s attempts to manipulate nature is to introduce a non-native species to control the proliferation of a native species or an undesirable intrusive species. In this spirit, the Madkhali movement was invited to Libya in the 1990s by Mu’ammar Qaddafi to offset the Salafi-Jihadism of al-Jama’a al-Islamiya al-Muqatila bi-Libya (Libyan Islamic Fighting Group – LIFG), which was threatening to overthrow Qaddafi’s regime at the time. [14] However, just as introduced species may proliferate and become an even greater problem than the one they were intended to solve, Madkhalism has taken root in Libya and has even infiltrated government-allied security services years after the disappearance of the LIFG as a coherent group.

During the 2011 revolution, al-Madkhali called on his Libyan followers to remain home, declaring participation to be *fitnah*, creating sedition against a lawful ruler (amongst other connotations that include falling into sin and hypocrisy). [15] The charge had an especially loaded meaning, having been used to describe the bitter civil wars that tore apart the early Muslim community in the 7th to 9th centuries C.E. The Madkhalis also opposed the anti-Assad rebellion in Syria on the usual grounds and disparaged those Salafists who supported it. [16]
In 2012 Rabi’s brother Muhammad (a professor at the Islamic University of Madinah) led the demolition of Sufi shrines in Libya. Sufism is despised by Salafists on the grounds that it promotes the idea of an intermediary (or “saint,” usually a deceased Sufi leader known for exceptional piety and knowledge) who intercedes between man and God. On August 24, 2012 Muhammad directed the demolition of a Sufi shrine in Zlitan (Murqub district on the Mediterranean, west of Misrata) using bulldozers, jackhammers and explosives. The Madkhalists went on to destroy the neighboring mosque and a library containing 700-year-old documents (France24.com, August 29, 2012). The demolition of the tomb of Abd al-Salam al-Asmar, a 15th-century Muslim scholar, followed by the demolition of the historic Sha’ab mosque in Tripoli while security forces looked on led to the resignation of the Interior Minister (al-Jazeera, August 26, 2016). [17]

In February 2015, al-Madkhali issued a fatwa issued forbidding participation in the battle between the largely Islamist and Tripolitanian Dawn coalition and the largely secular and Cyrenaican Operation Dignity forces led by General (now Field Marshal) Khalifa Haftar. [18] This was in keeping with Madkhalist principles, but in July 2016, al-Madkhali issued another fatwa urging all Libyan Salafists to join Haftar’s forces in fighting against the Benghazi Defense Brigade (BDB) led by Misrata’s Brigadier Mustafa al-Sharkasi and loyal to Libyan Chief Mufti Sadiq al-Ghariani. [19] The fatwa’s justification was that the BDB’s real objective was not to relieve Islamist fighters besieged in Benghazi, but to destroy Benghazi’s Sufist community. Perhaps influenced by the presence of Ismail al-Salabi (brother of prominent Libyan Muslim Brotherhood member Ali Muhammad al-Salabi) among the BDB commanders, al-Madkhali insisted the group was simply another manifestation of the Muslim Brothers, whom he described as more dangerous than Christians and Jews (Libya Observer, July 14, 2016). [20] In the process al-Madkhali ignited a feud with al-Ghariani, who accuses the Madkhalists of acting as spies and assassins for unnamed Gulf nations (Digital Journal, November 24, 2016).

Madkahli’s Libyan supporters use an estimated 30 FM radio stations to make their opposition known to al-Ghariani and the militias loyal to him (Digital Journal, November 24, 2016). In July 2016, the Shura Council of Libya’s Muslim Brotherhood denounced al-Madkhali’s attacks on the Grand Mufti (who they generally support) and called for Libya’s government to stop the Saudi government’s “blatant interference” in Libyan affairs (ikhwanweb.com, July 19, 2016). The adherence of Madkhalists in eastern Libya to Haftar’s camp since 2014 has created suspicion amongst those Libyans who view the Field Marshal as an ambitious interloper at best or an American intelligence asset at worst. Most of the armed Madkhalists supporting Haftar initially did so as part of the Salafist Tawhid Brigade commanded by the late Izz al-Din al-Tarhuni. After al-Tarhuni’s death in February 2015, the Tawhid Brigade broke up and its members joined various other units of Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA). [21] Madkhalists also joined in the successful offensive by the al-Bunyan al-Marsous coalition against Islamic State terrorists in Sirte, where their message may find some support after years of fighting have nearly destroyed the city, a former Qaddafi-era showpiece.

The Omrani Affair

Among those militias in which Madkhalist influence is strongest is the RADA Special Deterrence Force. RADA is a Tripoli-based militia that maintains security and operates smaller units elsewhere in Libya. Islamist in nature and led by Abd al-Rauf Kara, the unit is an independent formation under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior. Working out of a base at Tripoli’s Mitiga airport, the unit mounts operations against terrorists, criminal gangs, drug traffickers, kidnapping rings and arms smugglers, maintaining its own private prison at Mitiga. RADA opposes al-Ghariani’s influence and, following the principle of Wali al-Amr, is a strong backer of the Tripoli-based Presidency Council, the latest attempt to impose a united administration on fractured Libya.

Abd al-Rauf Kara

In November 2016, an individual named Haitham al-Zintani confessed to being the assassin of Shaykh Nadir al-Omrani, a member of al-Ghariani’s Dar al-Ifta Islamic Research and Studies Council who was kidnapped in Tripoli on October 6, 2016 (the shaykh’s body has not been found, but he is presumed dead on the basis of the confession).
Notes

4. Rabi’ al-Madkhali’s followers are often referred to as “Madkhalis” or the “Madkhaliya,” though they reject this usage much as other Saudi Salafists reject the terms “Wahhabi” or “Wahhabism” as they imply devotion to a man rather than God (in the latter case, the 18th century Najdi reformer Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab).
5. A hadith (Arabic – “report”) is a report of the Prophet Muhammad’s sayings or actions as transmitted through reliable religious authorities.
10. An example of the type of hagiographical material produced by al-Madkhali’s followers can be found in Abu Khadeejah Abdul-Walid, “Is Shaikh Rabee’ Ibn Haadee a great scholar of this era?” http://www.abukhadeejah.com/is-shaikh-rabee-ibn-haadee-a-great-scholar-of-this-era/
Islamist resistance to the efforts of anti-extremist government troops and militia allies to expel the radicals from the Libyan city of Benghazi has entered a crucial stage in which suicide bombers and desperate gunmen engaged in urban warfare imperil the lives of troops and civilians alike. In the midst of this conflict, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has attempted to intervene on the side of the Islamists by an unusual resort to historical anti-colonial rhetoric to rally support for the besieged fighters.

**A Message from Abu Ubaydah Yusuf al-Anabi**

Abu Ubaydah Yusuf al-Anabi, head of AQIM’s Council of Notables and AQIM’s second-in-command, posted an audio message on June 27 urging “the descendants of Omar al-Mukhtar” to rush to Benghazi to relieve the Islamic extremists trapped there by Libyan National Army (LNA) forces and allied militias. Abu Ubaydah called on Libyans to join the fight against the LNA and “French forces” said to be assisting the LNA campaign.[1]

**The Situation in Benghazi**

Most of the Islamist forces in Benghazi have joined together in the Shura Council of Benghazi Revolutionaries since June 2014. Along with Ansar al-Shari’a, the council includes the February 17 Martyrs Brigade, the Rafallah Sahati Brigade and the Libya Shield 1 militia. The Islamic State organization is also active in the remaining areas of Benghazi still held by Islamist radicals.

AQIM has never established a real presence in coastal Libya, though some members appear to have established bases in Libya’s remote
south-west, intended more as refuges and jumping-off points for operations in Algeria and the Sahelian regions of Niger and Mali rather than Libya. Instead, AQIM formed ties with Ansar al-Shari’a, an al-Qaeda-inspired Islamist militant group formed in the eastern cities of Derna and Benghazi during the 2011 revolution. Leadership difficulties and military pressure in the east led some Ansar members to abandon the loosely-formed group in favor of the more focused Islamic State group centered on Sirte. AQIM tends to regard Libya’s Islamic State as a rival rather than a partner, an observation seemingly confirmed by Abu Ubaydah’s failure to use his message to call for support for the Islamic State extremists currently besieged in Sirte in the same way he called for support for the Islamist militants in Benghazi.

LNA Operations in Benghazi, July 12, 2016 (Libyan Express)

AQIM’s leader Abd al-Malik Droukdel (a.k.a. Abu Mu’sab Abd al-Wadud) attempted to co-opt the Libyan Revolution from afar when he claimed in 2011 that the revolution was nothing more than a new phase of the Salafist-Jihadi struggle against Arab tyrants, an assertion made once more by Abu Ubaydah in 2013.[2]

Ansar al-Shari’a has battled General Khalifa Belqasim Haftar’s “Operation Dignity” forces (the so-called Libyan National Army [LNA] and its allies) for control of Benghazi since May 2014. At the time of writing, the area controlled by Ansar al-Shari’a and other Islamist groups has been reduced to roughly five square kilometers near the port area.

Who is Omar al-Mukhtar?

Libya’s most prominent national hero is without a doubt the Islamic scholar turned independence fighter Sidi Omar al-Mukhtar. Well versed in tactics learned opposing the Italian invasion of Libya in 1911 and during Sayyid Ahmad al-Sharif al-Sanusi’s failed invasion of British-occupied Egypt during World War One, al-Mukhtar began an eight-year revolt against Italian rule in 1923 using the slogan “We will win or die!” Shortly after the wounded guerrilla leader was captured in 1931, he was hung by Italian authorities in front of a crowd of 20,000 Libyans as a demonstration of Italian resolve and ruthlessness. The resistance collapsed soon afterwards, with some 50% of Libya’s population either forced into exile or dead from starvation, exposure and battle wounds.
Abu Ubaydah’s invocation of Omar al-Mukhtar was not unprecedented; during the 2011 revolution al-Qaeda spokesman Abu Yahya al-Libi urged Libyans to follow the example of al-Mukhtar, “the Shaykh of the Martyrs” while claiming al-Qaeda had inspired the revolution by shattering “the barrier of fear” that preserved Muslim regimes that ruled without sole reliance on Shari’a.[3]

Al-Mukhtar’s memory was suppressed during post-WWII Sanusi rule but was enthusiastically revived by Colonel Mu’ammar al-Qaddafi after the 1969 officers’ coup as a means of giving his regime and its anti-Western policies legitimacy by drawing on Libyans’ shared experience of resistance to colonialism. Qaddafi’s first post-coup speech was given in front of al-Mukhtar’s Benghazi tomb, and soon the guerrilla leader’s image was everywhere, including on Libya’s currency. In 1981 Qaddafi financed a big-budget film biography with Anthony Quinn playing al-Mukhtar and a grim-faced Oliver Reed as his deadly enemy, Italy’s Marshal Rodolfo Graziani.

Qaddafi gradually developed a highly individualistic amalgam of Islam, socialism and anti-colonialism that, to his disappointment, failed to gain traction outside of Libya, where it became the dominant political ideology only due to the weight of the state and its enforcement agencies. Qaddafi, however, continued to claim Omar al-Mukhtar as his prime inspiration.

Al-Qaeda and Anti-Colonialism

Due to its close links to nationalism, anti-colonialism has typically been treated carefully by al-Qaeda, whose goal is the creation of a pan-Islamic Arab-led Sunni caliphate rather than the perpetuation of Muslim-majority nations whose boundaries were defined by colonial powers. Recalling the examples of earlier Islamic anti-colonial movements presents al-Qaeda’s takfiri Salafists with an undesirable minefield of ideological dangers and contradictions. To cite only a few examples; Imam Shamyl’s mid-19th century jihad in the North Caucasus was entirely Sufi-based (Sufism being rejected in its entirety by modern Salafi-Jihadists), Sufi Ahmad al-Mahdi’s 19th century jihad in Sudan was meant to overthrow rule by the Ottoman Caliph and his Egyptian Viceroy rather than a European power, while Libya’s own anti-colonial Sanusi movement evolved by the end of World War II into a British-allied monarchy of the type rejected by jihadists throughout the Middle East. Al-Qaeda’s ability to find ideological, ethnic or religious failings in every Islamic movement but its own often strangles its ability to communicate its message; when it does relax its ideological firewalls enough to make historical reference to earlier Muslim leaders outside their usual pantheon it often sounds insincere, even desperate. As might be expected, the vital role played by Western-educated anti-colonial Muslim modernists in establishing today’s post-colonial nation-states is beyond al-Qaeda’s religious frame of reference and, beyond condemnation, remains an unmentionable topic in their public statements.

The most notable exception to this approach is in AQIM’s home turf of Algeria, where the al-Qaeda affiliate has always identified its main enemy as former colonial power France, issuing repeated calls for the death of French citizens and the destruction of their assets and interests in northern Africa. The origin for this lies in both AQIM’s relative isolation from al-Qaeda-Central and in the bitter experience of French colonial rule in Algeria, culminating in the brutal 1954-62 struggle for independence (inspired to a large degree by the success of the Marxist Viet Minh’s armed rejection of French colonialism in Indo-China). The Algerian independence movement was a product of its
time, and identified closely with the secular socialism promoted by China, the Soviet Union and influential anti-colonial theorists such as Franz Fanon, marginalizing more Islamic trends of resistance in the process. These trends became submerged in Algeria, where they became a type of unofficial opposition to Algeria’s growing authoritarianism and reliance on the military to preserve the post-independence regime. When a brief experiment with multi-party democracy appeared to be leading to an Islamist government in the 1991-92 elections, the regime promptly cancelled the elections, allegedly at the instigation of Paris. As a consequence, Abu Ubaydah refers to the Algerian regime as “the sons of France”. The Islamists launched a new insurgency whose vicious and callous treatment of innocent civilians (possibly with the participation of government-allied provocateurs) eventually led to a crisis within the armed Islamist movement and an eventual identification with the ideals of Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda movement that led to the creation in 2007 of an Algerian-based affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Due to its unique history and antecedents, AQIM is more likely to incorporate more traditional strains of anti-colonial thought into its messaging than other al-Qaeda affiliates in which historical references tend to hearken back to the glorious days of the mediaeval Islamic Empire rather than the more ideologically problematic colonial era. In the fierce fighting for Benghazi, it is somewhat natural then that AQIM ideologues like Abu Ubaydah would be more likely to turn to more-recent resistance leaders like Omar al-Mukhtar for inspiration than their fellow al-Qaeda affiliates.

Notably, Abu Ubaydah singles out French support for anti-terrorist operations in Benghazi, failing to note that the vast majority of those fighting and dying to retake the city from Islamist extremists are in fact Libyan Muslims. Though progress is slow, the ultimate defeat of the extremists (who have little popular support) seems certain – al-Ubaydah’s message is therefore not entirely focused on rallying his Islamist comrades, but also on persuading Benghazi’s Libyan assailants to abandon efforts to seize those parts of the city still under IS/Ansar al-Shari’a control.

The Italian Legacy

In response to the alleged presence of a small number of Italian Special Forces operatives in Libya, Abu Ubaydah claimed in a January audio message entitled “Roman Italy has occupied Libya” that the Italians had re-occupied Libya: “To the new invaders, grandchildren of Graziani, you will bite your hands off, regretting you entered the land of Omar al-Mukhtar and you will come out of it humiliated.”[4] Abu Ubaydah consciously usurped al-Mukhtar’s famous slogan “We will win or die” in his message in an attempt to align AQIM with the Islamist forces in Libya: “We are people who never give up, you will have to walk on our dead bodies. Either we win or we die.”[5] AQIM first encouraged the Libyan thawar (revolutionaries) to use the slogan in a 2011 message addressed to “the progeny of Omar al-Mukhtar.”[6]

In a further effort to compare the current struggle with al-Mukhtar’s anti-Italian revolt, the AQIM leader also referred to “an Italian general who now rules in Tripoli,” likely describing Italy’s General Paolo Serra, a veteran of Kosovo and Afghanistan and currently the military advisor to Martin Kobler, the UN’s special envoy to Libya.[7]

In March, Abu Ubaydah again referred to “the re-colonization of Libya, now ruled by an Italian general from Tripoli.” He went on to describe how colonialism had returned to North Africa:

After the Arab revolutions and the fall of dictatorships, the West cross saw the return of Muslims to their religion and their commitment to implement sharia, he added. He had no choice but to re-colonize their territory, get hold of their resources and the oil that continues its domination and our marginalization.[8]
New Mausoleum of Marshall Graziani

In an entirely different approach to Italy’s colonial legacy, Graziani, a convicted war criminal who flew to Libya to interview al-Mukhtar before his execution, was recently honored with a taxpayer-funded mausoleum and memorial park south of Rome.[8] Through his enthusiastic use of poison gas, chemical warfare, civilian massacres and massive concentration camps to impose Italian rule in Africa, Graziani gained the undesirable distinction of being remembered in Libya as “the Butcher of Fezzan” and in the Horn of Africa as “the Butcher of Ethiopia.”

Operation Volcano of Rage

An Islamist relief column of thirty to forty vehicles seems to have been spurred to relieve Benghazi not by al-Qaeda’s Abu Ubaydah, but rather by Libya’s Chief Mufti, Shaykh Sadiq al-Ghariani, under whose authority they claim to be fighting. The Shaykh has been Libya’s top religious cleric since February 2012, but has since become a divisive political figure generally siding with the Tripoli-based General National Congress government, also supported by Ansar al-Shari’a and the rest of the Shura Council of Bengazihi Revolutionaries.

The self-styled Benghazi Defense Brigade (BDB) began its march on Benghazi (named “Operation Volcano Rage) in late June by warning all residents of towns between Ajdabiya and Benghazi to stay out of their way or face destruction.[10] Nonetheless, the BDB had difficulty getting past Ajdabiya, where they met resistance from the LNA. Clashes around Ajdabiya were said to be responsible for disabling pumps in the Great Man-Made River Project that supplies water to Benghazi, which is already suffering from power cuts seven to eight hours a day.[11]
The alleged leader of the BDB offensive is Misrata’s Brigadier Mustafa al-Sharkasi. Other leading Islamist militants said to be with the BDB column include al-Sa‘adi al-Nawfali of the Adjabiya Shura Council, Ziyad Balham, the commander of Benghazi’s Omar al-Mukhtar Brigade and Ismail al-Salabi, commander of the Rafallah Sahati militia and brother of prominent Libyan Muslim Brotherhood member Ali Muhammad al-Salabi.

The Grand Mufti’s intervention in the ongoing battle for Benghazi is not surprising; al-Ghariani has in the past referred to those serving under General Haftar as “infidels” and has denied Ansar al-Shari’a is a terrorist group: “There is no terror in Libya and we should not use the word terrorism when referring to Ansar al-Shari’a. They kill and they have their reasons.” Al-Ghariani also declared “the real battle in Libya is the one against Haftar. Only when he is defeated will Libya find security and stability.” The BDB takes a similar view of General Haftar, accusing him of hiring mercenaries and collaborating with former regime members to kill innocents, steal goods and money, destroy homes and displace thousands of Benghazi residents.

Both the BDB and their mentor al-Ghariani profess to be opposed to the Islamic State, with some BDB members and leaders having fought the group around Sirte as part of the GNC’s Operation Dawn.

Despite a string of victory announcements by the LNA, the BDB still appears to be active some 30 km south of Benghazi (particularly in the region between Sultan and Suluq) as it continues to try to batter its way into the city. A sensational LNA pronouncement on July 10 claimed LNA airstrikes and attacks had devastated the BNB column, with radical Islamist Usama Jadhran (brother of powerful Petroleum Facilities Guard chief Ibrahim Jadhran) being killed and BNB commander al-Sharkasi being captured and removed to General Haftar’s headquarters. To date, the LNA have yet to confirm these claims, while the BNB insists al-Sharkasi remains free and that the BNB had actually overrun an LNA camp at al-Jalidiya on July 10, capturing significant arms and munitions.

Conclusion
Drawing on the radical inspiration of Egypt’s Sayyid Qutb, al-Qaeda rejects independent Muslim nation-states as long as they continue to adopt the forms of governance introduced by colonial regimes rather than governance drawn strictly from Shari’a in its Salafist interpretation, i.e. the sovereignty of God (al-hakimiya li’llah) over the sovereignty of man. Until this is achieved, according to Qutb, Muslim society will continue to exist in a state of jahiliya (the state of ignorance that prevailed in pre-Islamic society). Though the Grand Mufti’s appeals for anti-LNA intervention in Benghazi have had some limited success, calls from Abu Ubaydah for Muslims to flock to the aid of Libya’s hard-pressed Islamist militants have produced not even a noticeable trickle in comparison, suggesting that AQIM’s desire to influence Libya’s future remains largely disconnected most of the diverse political and religious approaches favored by Libya’s Muslims. Abu Ubaydah’s attempt to invoke the spirit of Omar al-Mukhtar to rally support for Benghazi’s Islamist militants is more likely to remind most Libyans of the abuse al-Mukhtar’s legacy suffered under Qaddafi than it is to launch new waves of dedicated jihadists. Unlike Abu al-Ubaydah, Omar al-Mukhtar did not need to invent an Italian occupation of Libya to rally his people against colonialism.

NOTES


Posted in Italy, Jihad Theory, Libya
Abstract: If the security situation in Libya deteriorates and the Islamic State makes further gains on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, there is the possibility that a coalition of foreign powers will feel compelled to intervene militarily. While such an intervention would likely be focused on the coastal regions, it would also likely have unforeseen consequences for southern Libya, a strategically vital region that supplies most of the country’s water and electricity. Militants could react by targeting this infrastructure or fleeing southward, destabilizing the region. For these reasons it is imperative that policymakers understand the strategic topography of southern Libya.

The Islamic State has succeeded in establishing a base in Sirte, Libya, on the Mediterranean coast, uncomfortably close to Europe. Unless a new government can unite the nation in deploying state security forces to eliminate the threat posed by the Islamic State, Ansar al-Sharia, and other extremist groups, there is a possibility of foreign military intervention. In this case, extremists could target the lightly guarded oil and water infrastructure in southern Libya essential for the survival of the nation.

Bitter and bloody tribal conflicts have erupted in the south since the 2011 Libyan Revolution, and in the absence of state authority, various militias established their own version of security and border controls. There is a strong danger of further violence in the south spreading to Libya’s southern neighbors or encouraging new independence movements. Identifying specific strategic locations in southern Libya, this article outlines the security challenges posed in each locale by virtue of its geography as well as its ethnic, political, and sectarian rivalries.

Until recently, the inability of Libya’s rival governments—the Tripoli-based General National Council (GNC) and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR)—to cooperate on the terrorism file has hampered the ability of foreign governments to provide military assistance. It has impeded Libya’s ability to tackle Islamist extremist movements as well, but this is beginning to change due to growing support for a unified Government of National Accord. [1]

Libya-based terrorist groups are mainly concentrated in the Mediterranean coastal strip, but they have recognized the importance of Libya’s southern interior and the vast reserves of energy and water vital for Libyan viability. Control of the south determines whether the lights go on in Tripoli or Benghazi, whether water runs from the taps, and whether salaries are paid or not. It also means control of important trade and smuggling routes, the source of narcotics, armed militants, and waves of desperate African refugees risking their lives...
Currently, there are indications that France, Italy, the U.K., and the United States have either initiated limited interventions in the form of small Special Forces units or are contemplating greater military involvement to destroy Libya’s Islamic State group and end the uncontrolled movement of refugees to Europe from the Libyan coast. In March the United Nations’ special envoy to Libya, Martin Kobler, warned Libyans that if they do not quickly address the problems of terrorism presented by Islamist extremists, “others will manage the situation.” However, Libyans’ bitter experience with colonialism makes them highly suspicious of the motives behind any type of foreign intervention.

**Geographic Considerations**

Libya is composed of three main regions: Tripolitania (the northwest), Cyrenaica (the eastern half), and Fezzan (the southwest). Most of Libya’s water and energy resources are found in the south, an area of rocky plateaus known as hamadat and sand seas (ramlat), all punctuated with small oases and brackish lakes. Mountainous areas include the Tadrart Acacus near Ghat in the Fezzan, the Bikku Bitti Mountains along the Chadian border, and Jabal Uwaynat in the southeast. The climate is exceedingly hot and arid with an average temperature of over 30 degrees Celsius; dry river beds known as wadis carry away the limited rainfall and are commonly used to conceal the movements of military or smuggling convoys. Sandstorms and high winds are common in March and April. The severe climate and isolation of Saharan Libya make it difficult to find security personnel from the north willing to serve there.

A Qaddafi initiative, the Great Man-Made River (GMR) taps immense reserves of fossil water (water trapped underground for more than a millennium) contained in the Nubian Sandstone aquifer under the Libyan desert to supply Libya’s coastal cities and various agricultural projects. GMR pipelines are vulnerable to tribal groups angered by government activities.

There are five energy basins (regions containing oil and gas reserves) in Libya: Ghadames/Berkine (northwest); Sirte, the most productive (central); Murzuq (southwest); Kufra (southeast); and the Cyrenaica platform (northeast). Of these, only the Kufra Basin is not yet in production.

Libya’s oases provide water and resting points in a strategic lifeline through otherwise inhospitable terrain and permit overland contact between the settlements of the Mediterranean coast and the African interior. Today, oil and water pipelines follow these routes, giving them even greater importance in the modern era.

**The Tribal Situation**

The southern Arabs fear that post-revolutionary demands for citizenship by non-Arab Tubu and Tuareg will make citizens of tens of thousands of non-Arabs from outside Libya’s borders, leaving the Arabs a minority in the region. The Tubu and Tuareg, in turn, fear they are victims of Arab machinations to cleanse Libya of non-Arab groups. The Tuareg, an indigenous African group, are found in Chad, northeastern Niger, and southern Libya, with a traditional stronghold in the remote Tibesti mountain range of northern Chad. The Tuareg are an indigenous Berber group organized in various confederations and spread through much of the Sahara/Sahel region, where they traditionally maintained control of trans-Saharan trade routes. In Libya the local Tuareg live in the southwest and are part of the Kel Ajjar confederation also found in eastern Algeria.

**Strategic Sites in Southern Libya**

In April 2014, French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian described southern Libya as “a viper’s nest in which jihadists are returning, acquiring weapons and recruiting.” Through Ottoman and Italian colonial rule, southern Libya provided a place of refuge for political, tribal, and religious groups that came into conflict with the established powers. More recently, it has offered operating space to extremist groups forced from neighboring areas such as northern Mali. With the development of Libyan plans to assault the Islamic State enclave in Sirte and the possibility of foreign military intervention at some point in the future if those efforts fail, it is worthwhile to examine those strategic sites in southern Libya that might provide new bases for Islamist extremists or those forces involved in combating such movements.
As a garrison town on the Algerian border and a center for Qaddafi loyalists, Ghat was one of the last urban areas in Libya to fall to rebel forces in late September 2011. Dotted throughout southern Libya are Ottoman and Italian fortresses, built on heights wherever possible to control important oases or the intersection of vital trade routes; many of these now serve as bases for regional militias. In Ghat, Tuareg militias hold the large Ottoman fortress on the Koukemen Hill finished by the Italians in the 1930s. There is also an airport 18 kilometers north of Ghat. The Ghat Tuareg control the Tinkarine border crossing into Algeria. Control of this crossing in the event of a foreign intervention would be essential to prevent cross-border movement of extremist groups. The Algerian Army closed the border with Libya in May 2014 after the In Amenas attacks, which originated in al-Uwaynat (not to be confused with al-Uwaynat in southeastern Libya), northeast of Ghat.[8]

Hun

Hun is the main town in al-Jufra oasis and a former colonial base for long-range patrols by the Italian Compagnia Sahariana. Other settlements in al-Jufra include Waddan, site of a pre-Ottoman Arab fortress; Sokna, the site of an Ottoman castle; Zellah Oasis, which is overlooked by a massive Italian-era hilltop fortress; and al-Fugha, a small oasis devoted, like the others, to date production. Al-Jufra Airbase is a dormant Libyan Air Force facility.
Jalu and Awjala

These oases are not in southern Libya proper, but they form an important link on the Kufra-Ajdabiya road and an entry point to the string of oases in Egypt’s Western Desert, a suspected route for arms traffickers. The town of Jalu, an important center for nearby oil fields, is located some 250 kilometers southeast of the Gulf of Sidra, while Awjala is about 30 kilometers northwest of Jalu. Jalu proved its strategic importance in both World War II and the Libyan Civil War during attempts to outflank opposing forces operating closer to the coast. Its size (19 kilometers by 11 kilometers) and freshwater supplies made it a useful base for military operations. As the dominant group in both oases is Eastern Berber, there is a possibility that ethnic tensions could be inflamed by renewed military activity in this strategically vitallocale.

Kufra

The town of Kufra and a surrounding cluster of small oases and agricultural projects have a population of roughly 40,000. Its strategic importance lies in its location between two sand seas, which, with its reserves of fresh water and food, make it an inevitable stop for vehicles making their way between the Cyrenaican coast and the African interior.

Zuwaya Arabs are the majority in Kufra, which has a Tubu minority. Both the Tubu and the Zuwaya maintain important communities in Ajdabiya charged with protecting tribal interests at the northern terminus of the trade route from Kufra. Should conflict erupt between these communities as a consequence of foreign military activity in the Ajdabiya region, the result could easily be the spread of communal clashes to the volatile Kufra area.

The route between Kufra and Ajdabiya was the site of numerous skirmishes between Qaddafi loyalists and Libyan rebels during the civil war, with the Qaddafists carrying out a long-range desert attack to seize Kufra before working their way north to the Jalu and Awjala oases, where efforts were made to damage water and oil installations.[9] The limited cooperation between revolutionary Tubu and Zuwaya against the Qaddafi regime did not last, with the Zuwaya describing the Tubu as Qaddafist collaborators or even foreign mercenaries. In 2012, the Zuwaya constructed large sand berms around Kufra to cut Tubu connections with the outside.

Disputes over control of smuggling and trading routes south of Kufra led to clashes between Tubu and Zuwaya in 2011, 2012, and 2013 that left hundreds dead. Mediation brought an end to a further two months of fighting in early November 2015. Isa Abd al-Majid Mansur, leader of the Tubu Front for the Salvation of Libya (TFSL), has promoted the idea of foreign intervention in Libya, suggesting the Tubu would make good partners in international counterterrorism and anti-smuggling operations.[10] While seemingly attractive given the Tubu’s deep knowledge of the little-known region, acceptance would immediately be viewed as unacceptable by rival Arab groups and inevitably regarded as a means of challenging the “Arab essence” of the Libyan state.

The construction of the Trans-Saharan road connecting Darfur to Kufra in the 1980s increased cross-border trade but also opened a reliable route for smugglers, human traffickers, and gunmen. Qatar appears to have used the route from Sudan to ship ammunition to Islamist militias in 2011.[11]

Darfur rebels of the Sudanese Liberation Movement-Minni Minnawi (SLM-MM) were accused by the GNC and the Sudanese government of collaborating with Tubu forces under the direction of General Khalifa Haftar in the unsuccessful September 20, 2015, attack on Kufra.

[12] The SLM-MM and Darfur’s Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) were accused of committing armed robberies and setting up illegal checkpoints north of Kufra this year before being driven out by Zuwaya militias in a two-day battle in February.[13] On April 24, 2016, Libya’s new Presidency Council announced it had received information that JEM was collaborating with Qaddafi loyalists to attack and disrupt oil facilities in southern Libya.[14] Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) has repeatedly accused Khartoum of shipping arms and fighters to Islamist groups by air and by the overland route through Kufra.[15]

Ma’atan al-Sarra

Ma’atan al-Sarra Oasis is located in the Kufra district some 60 miles north of the border with Chad. Qaddafi used the remote and rarely visited oasis as a supply base for Sadiq al-Mahdi’s 1976 attack on Khartoum. In the 1987 “Toyota War,” Chadian forces (mostly Tubu) took Ma’atan al-Sarra in a devastating surprise attack.
Murzuq

Murzuq, the unofficial “headquarters” of the Fezzan Tubu, is 150 kilometers south of Sabha. Murzuq, like Ubari, lies on the southwest to northeast route that separates the Ubari and Murzuq sand seas. Murzuq is populated by a potentially volatile mix of Tuareg, Tubu, Arabs, and al-Ahali (black Libyans descended from slaves or economic migrants from the African interior), with each community ready to exploit or reject foreign intervention in light of their own interests.

The head of the Murzuq Military Council, Colonel Barka Wardougou, a Libyan Army veteran with experience in Chad and Lebanon and the former leader of a Tubu rebel group in Niger that joined Niger’s 2007-2009 Tuareg rebellion, has demanded a more equitable distribution of Libya’s oil wealth, threatening to form a federal state if this is not accomplished.[16]

Qatrun

The road south from Murzuq runs through the oasis town of Qatrun, where it splits to run 310 kilometers southwest to the border post with Niger at Tummo, and southeast toward Chad. When the border post at Tummo is closed, travelers from Niger must report to Libyan authorities in Qatrun. The Tubu and Qaddadfa Arabs have a strong presence in the area.

Rabyanah Oasis and Sand Sea

On the western side of the southern route to Kufra is the inhospitable Rabyanah Sand Sea. Toward the eastern end of this feature is the Tubu-dominated Rabyanah Oasis, 130 kilometers west of Kufra, and the home district of several leading Tubu militia and political leaders as well as a Zuwaya minority. In the event of a foreign intervention, this region could provide a base for the development of new Tubu political factions.
Sabha, 500 miles south of Tripoli, is the site of an important military base and airfield. The city of 210,000 people acts as a commercial and transportation hub for the region. During the Qaddafi era, the oasis was used for the development of rockets and nuclear weapons. Sabha is a tinderbox of rival ethnic/tribal communities, including the Arab Qaddafi, their Awlad Sulayman rivals, Warfalla and Magraha Arabs, Tubu, and Tuareg. According to one Tubu leader, Sabha also serves as a local collection center for al-Qaeda fighters from Mauritania, Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia. If foreign extremists have already established a presence in Sabha, it would take very little to provoke new clashes that would further destabilize this important region.

The revolutionary Awlad Sulayman and the loyalist Qaddafi confronted each other during the civil war despite a tribal alliance. The largest Awlad Sulayman militia seized Sabha’s airport from a Hasawna Arab militia in September 2013. Clashes between the Tubu and members of the Arab Awlad Abu Seif and Awlad Sulayman tribes in March 2012 killed at least 100 people. By June the Tubu were clashing with the Libyan Shield Brigade that had been sent to restore order. The Tubu and the Awlad Sulayman set upon each other again in 2013 and 2014, while the Qaddafi Arabs and the Awlad Sulayman clashed in 2012, 2013, and 2014. By July 2015, the Sabha Tubu were involved in new clashes with both Tuareg and Qaddafi and demanding the expulsion of Awlad Sulayman fighters from Sabha’s Italian-era Elena castle (the former Fortezza Margherita).
Tamenhint airbase, 30 kilometers northeast of Sabha, allowed Qaddafi to project air power into the Sahel and was an important operational airstripe during the conflicts in Chad. The base was occupied by alleged “Qaddafists” in January 2014 who were driven out by government airstrikes and Tubu ground forces, though fighting continued for several days north of Tamenhint.[22]

**Salvador Pass**

The Salvador Pass lies at the north end of the Manguéni Plateau near the meeting point of Algeria, Niger, and Libya. Remote and unsupervised, the narrow mountain pass is used by well-armed traffickers and rebels to avoid the official crossing at Tummo.[23] Most notable of these is al-Murabitun leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who is believed to have used the Pass to flee from French-led forces in early 2013.[24] On the Libyan side, the Pass is nominally held by Tuareg militias that are often reduced to sending in reports of illegal crossings when they are outgunned. In mid-April 2015, the French 2e Régiment étranger de parachutistes (2e REP) met with a detachment of the Nigerien Army and consolidated control of the Pass.[25]

**Sarir**

The Sarir oil fields (400 kilometers south of Ajdabiya) are among Libya’s most productive and were the scene of heated struggles for control between Qaddafi loyalists and Tubu revolutionaries during the 2011 rebellion. There have since been repeated attacks on the Sarir power station and other facilities, the latest in mid-March 2016 when a suicide bomber and gunman believed to be affiliated with the Islamic State were killed by the Tubu 25th Brigade, affiliated with the Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG). Other gunmen escaped after damaging power lines, pipelines, and Great Man-Made River facilities.[26] Clashes between Zuwaya gunmen and Tubu guards in 2013 and 2014 caused power shortages in Benghazi and Tripoli.[27]

Hundreds of Tubu fighters from the 25th Brigade and others from the Desert Shield and Martyrs of Um Aranib militias in southwest Libya headed north to Benghazi to join the LNA in their campaign against Islamist groups in Benghazi in 2014.[28] Foreign intervention in Libya could compel these forces to return south to protect local interests with a subsequent reduction of experienced fighters available to combat extremist groups in the north.

**Sharara**

In the desert outside of Murzuq, 70 kilometers west of Ubari, is the Sharara oil field, Libya’s largest. The area has been the scene of fighting between Tuareg and Tubu groups with production halted repeatedly by armed protesters seizing facilities to press various demands.[29] Al-Sharara and the neighboring al-Fil oil field are guarded by a Tubu-dominated detachment of the PFG that includes Zintanis and a number of Tuareg and Arabs. The PFG shut down al-Fil for a month over unpaid salaries in May-June 2014.[30]

In November 2014, a Tuareg militia attacked Zintani members of the PFG, closing the field and depriving Libya of a third of its production. The Misratan 3rd Force operating out of Tamenhint Airbase joined forces with local Tuareg fighters and retook Sharara on November 7, 2014.[31]

**Tazirbu**

This group of 14 small oases, located roughly 250 kilometers northwest of Kufra, was formerly the seat of the Tubu Sultan, though the Zuwaya now dominate. Its importance today lies in the 120 wells just south of Tazirbu that pump aquifer water to Benghazi and Sirte through the GMR.

**Tummo Pass**

South of the Plateau du Manguéni is the Tummo Pass, the official but rarely attended border post between Niger and southwest Libya. In Niger, some 80 kilometers south of the Tummo Pass, French Legionnaires and Nigerien troops have set up a forward operating base and airstrip to conduct surveillance and interception operations at Fort Madama, a colonial-era French fort.[32] Like the Salvador Pass, control of this crossing would be essential to prevent the entry or escape of extremist groups in the event of a foreign intervention, though the French presence has gone a long way to secure the Pass.
Ubari

A town of 40,000 people, Ubari is in the Targa valley, 200 kilometers west of Sabha. The Tuareg majority were generally cordial with the Arab and Tubu minorities until the arrival of a Libya Dawn-affiliated Tuareg militia from outside the area in 2014. Local Tuareg who had refused to join the group were nevertheless pulled into the fighting when the militia clashed with armed Tubu groups, splitting the town into two parts. After a year of fighting and hundreds of deaths, a peace agreement ended 14 months of conflict in November 2015, but sporadic clashes continue.[33]

The latest of these involved bombardments by Tuareg occupying the Tendi Mountain high ground that damaged Tubu neighborhoods and Ubari’s historic Ottoman castle (now used as a fort by Tubu fighters).[34]

A former military compound in Ubari is used as a base for the Border Guards Brigade 315, an Islamist militia led by Tuareg Salafist scholar and former Ansar al-Din deputy commander Ahmad Omar al-Ansari who operates a religious school in a slum area of Ubari. [35] Brigade 315 serves simultaneously as a border guard and an alleged conduit for extremists crossing into Libya.[36]

Al-Uwaynat

Al-Uwaynat is a mountain complex of 1,200 square kilometers situated at the meeting point of Libya, Egypt, and Sudan and is best known for several small springs in the midst of an otherwise waterless desert. During the Libyan revolution, Sudan set up a military support base for the Libyan rebels at Uwaynat.[37] Today, the route has been revived for commercial traffic, smuggling, human trafficking, tourist expeditions, and the movement of armed groups. Sudan has long feared the entry of al-Qa`ida or Islamic State groups into the unstable Darfur region through this route and would almost certainly bring strong forces into the area to prevent the infiltration of radical Islamists seeking to escape a foreign military intervention in Libya.

Al-Wigh Air Force Base

Strategically located close to the borders with Niger, Chad, and Algeria, al-Wigh is currently held by the Tubu Um al-Aranib Martyrs’ Brigade. In 2013, Prime Minister Ali Zidan rejected rumors al-Wigh was being used for French Special Forces operations or as a base for terrorist operations in Algeria.

Southern Libya’s Borders

Libya’s southern borders include those with Algeria (982 kilometers), Chad (1,055 kilometers), Sudan (383 kilometers), and Niger (354 kilometers). Most of the southern tribes have benefitted slightly, if at all from Libya’s enormous oil wealth, leading to competition over the cross-border smuggling trade that often takes on ethnic or tribal overtones. Sudan and Libya created a joint border patrol in 2013, but Libya pulled out of the joint patrols in the summer of 2015.[38] In the absence of government authority, control of Libya’s southern borders has been divided between Tubu and Tuareg militias. In the west, the Tuareg control the borders with Algeria and Niger as far as the Tummo border crossing; past that the borders with Niger, Chad, and Sudan are controlled by the Tubu as far as Jabal Uwaynat.[39]

Whether Tuareg or Tubu, border patrols in the south are unfunded by Libyan authorities. As a consequence, the patrols claim to focus on “social evils,” such as arms, narcotics, and militants, allowing fuel, subsidized food, cigarettes, and illegal migrants to pass for a fee. Tubu patrols on the western border complain that they receive no response from government authorities when they report terrorist infiltrations, resulting in easy entry to Southern Libya for jihadist groups operating in the Sahel/Sahara region.[40]

Conclusion

A limited deployment in northern Libya could easily trigger violence in southern Libya that would destabilize the nation as a whole through the uncontrolled infiltration of extremists through a region already notorious for a perilous combination of vital economic installations and a general absence of security. Foreign intervention in a region historically hostile to foreign rule and where the state is already regarded as weak and unsympathetic to local aspirations could also encourage southern separatism. Various groups in the south have pondered the possibility of independence, namely the Tuareg centered around Kufra, the Tuareg in the southwestern border regions, and some Arab factions in the Fezzan, alarming Libya’s southern and western neighbors where such movements have been active for decades.

A January Islamic State video statement threatened attacks on “al-Sarir, Jalu, and al-Kufra,”[41] but religious extremism has so far played only a small role in southern Libya’s political and ethnic violence. Porous borders present the possibility of Libya’s south acting as a gateway for jihadis from the Sahara/Sahel to pour into Libya to confront a foreign intervention, while Islamic State fighters might move south from Sirte in the event of an intervention, either with the intention of attacking vital installations, connecting with other Islamist groups in Libya’s southwest, or escaping into the Sahel.

Until the establishment of a representative unity government in Tripoli with the ability to deploy recognized national security units instead of ethnically or regionally based militias, vital southern oil and water infrastructure will present an enticing target for attacks by terrorists, rebels, or criminal organizations.
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Citations


[18] Lacher.

[19] Ibid.


[32] Video of 2 REP in the Salvador Pass is available on YouTube.


[38] “Sudanese army says Libya pulled out its troops from the joint border force,” Sudan Tribune, August 2, 2015.


an unorthodox approach to Islam in which he was uniquely gifted with the ability to interpret the Quran while diminishing the importance of the hadiths and Sunna. The result was state-imposed “Islamic socialism,” tightly tied to Qaddafi’s poorly received implementation of the Libyan jamhariya (“state of the masses”) as the national political structure. Unwilling to enter into debate over his controversial interpretations of Islam (likely due to his lack of scholarship in this area as well as his personal arrogance), Qaddafi took harsh measures against Libya’s Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s, plunging many Brothers into grim prisons while driving others into self-exile in Europe and America. Ironically, it was Qaddafi’s repression of Sufist worship that allowed the Muslim Brothers to fill a void in the spiritual and political opposition to Qaddafi during the 2011 revolution. At the forefront of these efforts was a second-generation Muslim Brother, Shaykh Ali Muhammad al-Salabi.

Shaykh Ali Muhammad al-Salabi (Moises Saman, NYT)

The Libyan Ikhwan

The Libyan Muslim Brotherhood was formed in 1949. Prior to the 2011 revolution, membership was traditionally small and heavily focused on professionals, many of whom were based in the West, with Geneva serving as a type of headquarters for the exiled Brothers. Their first post-revolutionary conference on Libyan soil was held in November 2011.

The development of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood was strongly influenced by the arrival of numerous Ikhwan [“Brothers”] from Egypt following Nasser’s decision to repress the movement after initially cooperating with it. Many of the exiles were academics and access to educational institutions under King Idris exposed many Libyan youth to the Brotherhood’s ideology. Qaddafi’s 1969 coup brought this period to an end, and the movement henceforth developed largely in exile in Europe and the United States. [1]

Officially, the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood is led by Ahmad Abdullah al-Suqi of Misrata, though al-Salabi is a prominent, if unofficial, intellectual and spiritual leader, largely through his international connections, including a close relationship to Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Brotherhood’s Qatar-based over-all spiritual leader (Libya Herald, October 5, 2015). Hizb al-Adala wa’l-Tamiyya (the Justice and Development Party) is widely considered to be the movement’s political arm in Libya, though party leader Muhammad Sawan (a former political prisoner) insists that the party is “administratively and financially independent of the Muslim Brotherhood” (al-Jazeera, July 3, 2012).

Early Life in the Qaddafi Era

Born in 1963, al-Salabi is the son of a Benghazi banker and Muslim Brotherhood member who was imprisoned for opposing the Qaddafi regime. Under his influence, al-Salabi joined the movement himself while still a youth. At 18-years of age, al-Salabi was sentenced to eight years in Tripoli’s Abu Salim prison in connection to an alleged role in a plot to kill Mu’amar Qaddafi, though al-Salabi maintains his only crime was praying at the mosque daily and encouraging others to do so (Washington Post, December 9, 2011). [2]

Over 1200 prisoners (mostly but not exclusively Islamists) were massacred in a single day at Abu Salim prison in 1996 (prior to al-Salabi’s incarceration). Mu’amar’s son, Sa’if al-Islam al-Qaddafi, made efforts to address the still-simmering anger over the Abu Salim massacre by promising an investigation into the still-taboo subject in 2008. With Qaddafi still in power, the resulting probe found few witnesses or participants willing to discuss what orders were given and by whom. Ultimately, it was small-scale protests over the Abu Salim massacre in Benghazi that sparked the Libyan uprising in 2011.
His sentence done, al-Salabi lost little time in leaving Libya in 1998 to take a bachelor’s degree at the Islamic University of Madinah, followed by a master’s degree and a doctorate from Omdurman Islamic University in Sudan. Ultimately, al-Salabi settled in Qatar, where the regime was supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood so long as it remained uninvolved in domestic politics. Qatar is host to a significant international Muslim Brotherhood community, though the movement does not operate in Qatar itself, the local chapter of the Brotherhood having shut itself down as redundant in 1999 after first expressing its approval of the state’s religious direction and administration (The National [Abu Dhabi], May 18, 2012).

In 2009, al-Salabi served as a mediator between the regime, as represented by Sa’if al-Islam Qaddafi, and still-imprisoned members of the Jama’a al-Islamiya al-Muqatila bi-Libya (Libyan Islamic Fighting Group – LIFG), most of whom were kept under often brutal conditions in Abu Salim prison.

Heads by al-Salabi, funded by Qatar and drawing inspiration from a similar Egyptian effort (Dr. Fadl’s “Revisions”), the initiative used arguments based on Islamic theology to de-radicalize imprisoned militants and resulted in the production of a book written by Abd al-Hakim Belhaj and five other leading Islamist prisoners, Corrective Studies in Understanding Jihad, Enforcement of Morality and Judgement of People. [3]

It was during this time that al-Salabi began to forge a relationship with Belhaj, a still incarcerated LIFG commander. As a result of the initiative, hundreds of Islamists were released from Libyan prisons after swearing not to take up arms against the regime. Belhaj and several other former LIFG commanders became closely associated with al-Salabi after their release, though their oath meant little in the end.

Scholarship

Salabi’s Master’s thesis, Al-Wasatiyah fi al-Qur’an al-Karim (Moderation in the Noble Quran), was published in Arabic in 2001. The work examines the concept of wasatiyah in Islamic epistemology, a concept that calls on Muslims to adopt a balanced approach to Islam that emphasizes fairness and best practices. [4] After completing a doctorate in Islamic studies at Omdurman Islamic University in the Sudan in 1999, al-Salabi produced a series of biographies (often in multiple volumes) of the Prophet Muhammad, the early Caliphs, crusader adversary Salah al-Din al-Ayubi and others.

All these works (save his master’s thesis) have been translated into English by Saudi publishing houses and garnered general scholarly approval in the Islamic community and wide sales internationally, though the Russian seizure of a single copy of al-Salabi’s biography of the first Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, led to a 2014 ban on the unexplained claim the work contained “information aimed at justifying suicidal terrorism and armed struggle (jihad) in the path of Allah under the guise of religious ideology” (Forum 18, March 20, 2015). Al-Salabi also specializes in the study of hadith-s, accounts of the words or actions of the Prophet Muhammad. Prior to his return to Libya in 2011, al-Salabi was best known to other Libyans by his frequent appearances on Qatar-based al-Jazeera TV.

Revolution

Shortly after the anti-Qaddafi revolution began in February 2011, Qatar decided there was an opportunity to increase its influence in Libya, which is similarly blessed with massive reserves of gas, possibly with a mind to expanding the operations of Qatar’s highly successful natural gas firms (Reuters, June 9, 2011). Al-Salabi returned to Libya to act as the point man for shipments of arms from Qatar and the provision of Qatari intelligence and training from Qatari Special Forces operatives. Qatar’s support for the Salabis and the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood appears to have been more practical than ideological in that the chaotic early days of the revolution offered few (if any) other Islamist groups that could claim to be fully organized with an established hierarchy. Nonetheless, Doha’s preference for Islamist revolutionary groups and al-Salabi’s pre-existing relationship with the Qatari regime sealed the deal, and soon both parties began to build a network of influence funded and controlled from Doha.

Contacts between al-Salabi and Sa’if al-Islam Qaddafi appear to have continued well into the revolution; in July 2011, Sa’if al-Islam
Post-Revolution Politics

Al-Salabi loudly opposed the appointment of Mahmoud Jibril (a close friend of Sa’ïf al-Islam Qaddafi) to head the Transitional National Council (TNC) during the revolution. Though Jibril had proclaimed Shari’a would be the basis of all Libyan legislation, he remained tainted in the Islamists’ eyes by his former role as a major player in the Qaddafi administration. The pressure from al-Salabi, Belhaj and others eventually compelled Jibril to resign on October 23, 2011. Ironically, one of al-Salabi’s criticisms was that Jibril was going too far by announcing he would ban all non-Islamic finance, with al-Salabi stating simply that “We are part of international banking systems” (Telegraph, November 10, 2011).

Al-Salabi’s vitriolic personal attacks on Jibril quickly backfired, with some of his own supporters melting away as protests against his remarks broke out in Benghazi and Tripoli. Even Abd al-Hakim Belhaj failed to rally behind the Ikhwan leader. Forced to step back until the controversy subsided, earlier predictions that al-Salabi would emerge as Libya’s first post-revolution leader were proved false. [5]

The Islamist Hizb al-Watan (Homeland Party) was founded by al-Salabi and Belhaj in November 2011 (initially under the short-live name National Gathering for Freedom, Justice and Development. According to al-Salabi, the movement was “not an Islamist party, but a nationalist party…but its political agenda respects the general principles of Islam and Libyan culture” (Telegraph, November 10, 2011). Al-Salabi has been publicly consistent on two principles; first, that the movement is democratic and second, that the movement is focused on the implementation of moderate Islamic politics along the lines of the “moderate” Islamist governments of Turkey and Malaysia. He was supported in this by Belhaj, the allegedly reformed militant, when he stated: “Libyans are Muslims and they call for moderate Islam, so none of us poses a threat to anyone inside or outside Libya” (al-Jazeera, July 3, 2012).

Salabi told a post-revolution gathering that included Islamic scholars critical of his decision to enter politics: “We call for a moderate Islam. But you all have to understand that Islam is not just about punishment, cutting hands and beheading with swords’ (Reuters, October 10, 2011).

Contrary to expectations, Hizb al-Watan failed to take a single seat in the Libyan National Assembly election of 2012, which was easily won by Mahmoud Jibril’s National Forces Alliance (39 seats, 48% of the vote). [6] The Muslim Brother’s Justice and Development Party took 10% of the vote, but benefitted from the election of a large number of independent candidates sympathetic to the Brotherhood.

Situating himself as a proponent of democracy, al-Salabi called for general elections in May 2015 “to put an end to the bloodshed and protect Libya,” urging the UN envoy to Libya and Libyan politicians to stop “wasting time and effort and manipulating Libyans’ feelings in preparation to invade their country under the pretext of combating terrorism” (Middle East Monitor, May 5, 2015).

In interviews with Western journalists, al-Salabi inevitably professes an admiration for American-style democracy that he claims began when he read Jefferson in prison (Washington Post, December 9, 2011). Responding to a leaked video showing the beating of Sa’adi Qaddafi in a GNC prison in Tripoli and reports that former regime members were being tortured in revolutionary prisons, al-Salabi denounced the treatment, insisting it repeated the “authoritarian behavior that was ousted in the 17 February revolution” (Middle East Memo, August 6, 2015).

Isma’il al-Salabi

Al-Salabi works closely with his brother Isma’il, who was also imprisoned by Qaddafi in 1997 until his release in 2004. During the revolution, Isma’il took command of the Raffalah Sahati militia, a main recipient of Qatari arms and a part of the February 17 Brigade, a coalition of Islamist militias. The May 2014 launch of Operation Dignity by General Khalifa Haftar quickly led to clashes in Benghazi between Isma’il’s Raffalah Sahati Brigade and Haftar’s Libyan National Army, with tensions between the two groups continuing to this day (al-Hayat, May 19, 2014).

All and Isma’il al-Salabi work closely with Jalal al-Dughelli, a politician and former soldier who served as Defense Minister in the post-revolutionary TNC, a position that allowed him to help with the mass transfer of Qatari arms to Islamist revolutionaries.

A third brother, Khalid al-Salabi, left Libya in 1996 and is an imam at a Galway mosque in Ireland and head of the Galway Islamic Society (Irish Times, September 10, 2011).

Conclusion

The influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya is now being challenged by the upstart Islamic State organization. The extremism of the Islamic State is obviously distant from al-Salabi’s emphasis on moderation; to counter the movement, the cleric has called for a national unity government that possesses a clear mandate to combat terrorism and “is also prepared to cooperate with the international war on terrorism” (Libya Herald, March 1, 2016).

Al-Salabi appears to have pulled back from the political scene to some degree today, but continues to be active in promoting and organizing Islamist forums. The Shaykh may still play a role in restoring Libyan stability, but it has become clear al-Salabi speaks for only
a small percentage of Libyans. His professions of moderation in both Islam and Islamist politics brings back unfortunate memories of Egypt’s Muhammad al-Mursi’s embracement of moderation and inclusion in Egypt’s post-revolutionary period before the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood sought to control most elements of Egyptian society and governance, bringing themselves down in the process. Unlike al-Mursi, al-Salabi’s interest in moderation appears sincere and long-held; on the other hand, his close association with Belhaj, a former militant whose disavowal of extremism appears somewhat less certain, and Islamist militias including the one controlled by his brother, lead to inevitable questions about his commitment to democratic ideals. Libyan gratitude for Qatar’s assistance during the revolution has withered into a growing resentment of what is now widely viewed as a prolonged interference in Libya’s domestic politics. Once an asset, al-Salabi’s close relations with the Qatars has begun to work against him in the Libyan political arena.

Al-Salabi recently insisted that both the General National Congress (GNC) government in Tripoli and the rival House of Representatives (HoR) government in Tobruq must resign, as neither institution is legitimate. Only in this way can a real and inclusive national dialogue be initiated to restore Libyan unity (Middle East Monitor, November 23, 2015). With both governments doggedly hanging on to belief in their own legitimacy a month later, al-Salabi issued a call for the leaders of both institutions to meet with Fayez al-Sarraj, head of the new UN-sponsored Government of National Accord (GNA), the latest effort to unite Libya’s political structure (Libya Prospect, December 21, 2015).

For now, al-Salabi’s campaign to promote modernity and moderation in Islamist politics is treated with some suspicion by many Libyans following the Egyptian Brotherhood’s disastrous term as the government of Egypt. However, as Libyans continue to struggle to establish a unity government and bring an end cycles of ethnic and political violence, new opportunities will undoubtedly emerge for al-Salabi and his colleagues to ensure Islamists are well represented in any future government.

Notes


This article first appeared in the March 2016 issue of the Jamestown Foundation’s Militant Leadership Monitor.
April 2017 (1)
March 2017 (1)
February 2017 (2)
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October 2002 (1)
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March 2001 (2)
August 1999 (1)
August 1998 (1)
May 1995 (1)

CATEGORIES
Abkhazia (1)
Abu Sayyaf (4)
Afghanistan (49)
African Union (11)
Algeria (25)
Angola (1)
Armored Trains (3)
Australia (1)
Azerbaijan (1)
Bahrain (3)
Balochistan (3)
Bangladesh (2)
Berbers (5)
Biafra (1)
Bio-Chemical Warfare (4)
Boko Haram (18)
Bosnia (1)
Burkina Faso (5)
Burundi (5)
Cameroon (3)
Canada (6)
Casamance (1)
Central African Republic (14)
Chad (22)
Chechnya (24)
China (12)
Circassia (1)
Coptic Christians (4)
Counter-Terrorism Theory (4)
Crimea (1)
Dagestan (4)
Darfur (39)
Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (12)
Djibouti (6)
Drones (2)
Egypt (67)
Eritrea (3)
Ethiopia (14)
France (25)
Gama’a al-Islamiya (9)
Gambia (1)
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