

LIFG Revisions Posing Critical Challenge to Al-Qa`ida

By Paul Cruickshank

IN SEPTEMBER 2009, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), a militant Libyan jihadist group whose leaders have deep personal ties to al-Qa`ida's top figures, published a 417-page revisions document. The treatise publicly repudiated al-Qa`ida's ideology, ended the LIFG's campaign to overthrow Libya's leader Mu`ammar Qadhafi from power, and offered a fundamental rethink of the group's own attitude toward violence. The document was the culmination of nearly three years of peace talks between the imprisoned leadership of the LIFG and the Libyan government.¹

Some observers have dismissed the revisions as relatively insignificant.² This article, however, argues that the Libyan document is the most significant critique of al-Qa`ida that has yet emerged from jihadist circles, and adds considerable weight to a growing "jihadist revolt" that threatens the very sustainability of al-Qa`ida's global terrorist campaign.³ The article identifies eight reasons why the LIFG revisions should have a positive impact

1 Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, "New Jihad Code Threatens Al Qaeda," CNN, November 10, 2009. The peace talks were held between members of the security services and six members of the LIFG's *shura* council: `Abdullah Sadiq (the *amir*), Abu al-Mundhir al-Sa`idi (the religious guide), Abu Hazim (the deputy leader), Abu al-Zubayr (the military commander), `Abd al-Wahhab Qa`id (a founder of the group whose brother Abu Yahya al-Libi is a senior figure within al-Qa`ida), and Abdul Ghaffar (the group's first *amir*). The meetings were also attended by Noman Benotman (a former commander in the LIFG) and Ali al-Sallabi (a prominent Libyan Islamic thinker living in Qatar) who Saif Qadhafi asked to be intermediaries in the talks.

2 Alison Pargeter, a senior research associate at Cambridge University, wrote in the October 2009 *CTC Sentinel* that "despite predictions in some quarters that this ideological shift will have major repercussions in jihadist circles and beyond...they are unlikely to have much effect at all and may only spark relatively insignificant debate." See Alison Pargeter, "LIFG Revisions Unlikely to Reduce Jihadist Violence," *CTC Sentinel* 2:10 (2009).

3 Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, "Unraveling: The Jihadist Revolt Against Bin Laden," *The New Republic*, June 11, 2008.

in weakening al-Qa`ida and like-minded groups.

A Receptive Audience?

Some analysts have argued that the LIFG revisions will have little effect on the overall jihadist movement. Alison Pargeter, for example, has expressed doubt about the effectiveness of the revisions, arguing that "the new generation of militants seems to be characterized by their low education levels, nihilism and desperation" and are likely to either fail to take notice of the document or dismiss it as the work of long-defeated "older leaders" coerced into revising their ideology in prison.⁴ The LIFG revisions will be limited in its impact on al-Qa`ida and al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), she argued, because the LIFG has kept its distance from these groups and long opposed their ideology of global jihad. Although the LIFG revisions add to a growing body of former militants criticizing al-Qa`ida, Pargeter believes that such revisions "are being undertaken by failed movements and older leaders who in the eyes of the young are no longer relevant to the cause."⁵

Yet although the Libyan revisions will doubtlessly be rejected by al-Qa`ida's most die-hard supporters, not all potential recruits are so hard-line that they are completely immune from the growing critique of al-Qa`ida coming from longstanding jihadist groups and historical leaders of the jihadist movement.⁶ The LIFG revisions may not have been read by all militants, but they received large media coverage in the Middle East and have already been the subject of much debate on jihadist websites.⁷ Although the revisions have been criticized by some on these forums, the fact that they are being debated at all is significant in itself. "Sure, some say that this message is coming from old-

4 Pargeter.

5 Ibid.

6 Al-Qa`ida's barbaric violence in Iraq persuaded many of these groups to publicly criticize the organization. See Bergen and Cruickshank, "Unraveling: The Jihadist Revolt against Bin Laden." Several senior members of the LIFG in Abu Salim prison and former members living in the West told the author that al-Qa`ida's violent excesses in Iraq were a key factor in the decision to review their ideology.

7 Personal interview, Noman Benotman, November 2009.

timers who are not fighting any more," explained Noman Benotman, a former commander in the LIFG and a key intermediary in the Libyan peace talks. "Sure they use emotional blackmail and say we are dying for you and you say this? But what I'm trying to do is to start to make the young think."⁸

Benotman's point is important because potential candidates for al-Qa`ida suicide bombings are less likely to volunteer if they have doubts about the religious legitimacy of their actions and the likely rewards that await them. "Jihad has ethics and morals because it is for God," the revisions state. "That means it is forbidden to kill women, children, elderly people, priests, messengers, traders and the like."⁹

The Libyan revisions are all the more significant because they provide theological cover for mainstream Muslim voices to also criticize al-Qa`ida. That can only strengthen a global backlash against the terrorist network in Muslim communities worldwide. While an extremist fringe may survive in the short-term, or even relish their separateness and draw sustenance from the echo chamber provided by pro-al-Qa`ida websites on the internet, the experience of Algeria in the 1990s and Iraq in the 2000s, in which militant ranks shrunk after the general public turned against them, suggests extremists do not operate in a vacuum.¹⁰

While al-Qa`ida's leaders in the tribal areas of Pakistan are genuinely removed from societal influences, the same cannot be said of extremists living in the sprawling urbanized landscape of the Middle East and North Africa where satellite dishes are ubiquitous. While

8 Ibid.

9 "Corrective Studies in Understanding Jihad, Accountability, and the Judgment of the People," LIFG recantations document, September 2009, p. 203.

10 Public support for Islamist insurgents in Algeria dried up after the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), the most violent militant group, began targeting Algerian civilians in attacks. Not only did this help the government isolate the group, but it also greatly affected the GIA's recruitment efforts leading to its near total defeat. In Iraq, AQI's oppression of the local population provoked a backlash against it in the Sunni community that spread from Anbar Province to the whole country, greatly reducing the number of Iraqis joining AQI's ranks.

the Iraq war arguably contributed to a surge in hardcore extremism in recent years, it is no longer generating anything like the same degree of anger.¹¹

A Credible Challenge to Al-Qa`ida

There are eight reasons to be optimistic about the impact of the LIFG revisions. The first is the fact that they are being made by a jihadist group of high prominence and historical importance. "Our group is a reference point for many Islamic groups; so its book will be of significance to many Islamic groups," Tarek Durman, a mid-level commander in the LIFG arrested in Jordan in 2000, told CNN.¹² The threat the LIFG posed to the Libyan state in the mid-1990s was much greater than has thus far been reported, a function of the LIFG training more than 1,000 fighters in Afghanistan that decade to fight in Libya.¹³ "[The LIFG were] very aggressive, extremely dangerous and to be honest with you during the nineties it was like a civil war here in Libya, it was a hidden one, but in fact it was a civil war," Saif Qadhafi told CNN.¹⁴ While the LIFG capabilities were significantly degraded inside Libya in the late 1990s, the LIFG until recently maintained an extensive international network.¹⁵ At the time of 9/11, the LIFG's international network was even the envy of al-Qa`ida; the LIFG had repeatedly resisted al-Qa`ida's requests to take advantage of its network of country stations and distributive media capabilities.¹⁶

11 Personal interviews, Muslim community leaders, former jihadists and counterterrorism officials, 2009.

12 Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, CNN interview with Tarek Durman, Abu Salim prison, Tripoli, Libya, September 2009.

13 Personal interview, Noman Benotman, September 2008.

14 Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, "Militant Deal Opens Door to New Libya," CNN, November 27, 2009.

15 At its peak in the mid-1990s, the LIFG maintained 17 country stations around the world including four in Europe and one in Canada that served as its North American base, according to Noman Benotman, a former commander of the LIFG. Benotman said that when the LIFG entered peace talks in 2007 it still had a significant number of operatives at large in Libya, the Middle East and the West that would have been able to reactivate operations if ordered to do so by the group. Personal interview, Noman Benotman, December 2009.

16 Personal interview, Noman Benotman, September 2009.

Second, the top leaders of the LIFG, despite being imprisoned in the international dragnet that followed 9/11, remain figures of continued consequence in the jihadist movement with the credibility to make their criticisms of al-Qa`ida effective.¹⁷ Many LIFG leaders fought alongside al-Qa`ida fighters in the 1980s and 1990s in Afghanistan. In the early 1990s, LIFG leaders were closely aligned ideologically to al-Qa`ida's hard-line Egyptian faction in their desire to bring jihad back to Muslim lands.¹⁸ In Taliban-run Afghanistan in the late 1990s, Abu al-Mundhir al-Sa`idi, the group's religious leader and one of the authors of the revisions, was in every respect an equal and a peer to Usama bin Ladin in jihadist circles. Indeed, Mullah Omar bestowed on al-Sa`idi the title "Shaykh al-Arab" (the leader of the Arabs).¹⁹

Third, despite the fact that the LIFG never joined al-Qa`ida nor shared its ideology of global jihad, the close personal ties between its leaders meant that al-Qa`ida still considered the LIFG's leaders brothers in arms. To his likely regret, Ayman al-Zawahiri in the years after 9/11 regularly praised al-Sa`idi in online statements. The most recent warm words came in an August 2009 video in what may have been an attempt by al-Zawahiri to head-off publication of the revisions, a statement that may now complicate his ability to respond to the revisions.²⁰ While al-Sa`idi and Benotman voiced private

17 Abu al-Mundhir al-Sa`idi, the group's religious leader, was arrested in Thailand in 2004. `Abdullah Sadiq, the group's leader, was arrested the same year in Hong Kong. After being held by the Central Intelligence Agency for an unclear amount of time, they were transferred to Libya. Personal interview, former member of the LIFG, August 2009.

18 A *fatwa* issued by Abu al-Mundhir al-Sa`idi in the early 1990s made clear the influence of hard-line Egyptian ideologue Sayyid Qutb on the group: "The current regime in Libya is an ignorant and unbelieving one. It is incumbent upon every Muslim in Libya to participate in toppling and fighting it with all they can, be it actual fighting or offering assistance to the fighters. Those who will not join in fulfilling this Godly obligation without an excuse other than illness, blindness, lameness or such like, is committing a capital sin and as such is a infidel."

19 Personal interview, former member of the LIFG, London, August 2008.

20 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "The Facts of Jihad and the Lies of Hypocrisy," al-Sahab, August 3, 2009.

disagreement with al-Qa`ida's decision to start attacking the United States at a meeting of jihadists in Kandahar in 2000, the revisions represent the first time the group's *shura* council has publicly broken with Bin Ladin's terrorist network.²¹

Fourth, the top leadership of the LIFG deliberately framed their critique of al-Qa`ida's ideology from a jihadist perspective, a move that will make its

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message resonate more with its target audience. "The starting point is that jihad is legitimate otherwise nobody will listen to you," said Benotman. "It was based on Islamic values and concepts and vocabularies and rules. That means it's very hard for the other party to argue with the pages."²² Accordingly, while the LIFG revisions sharply repudiated al-Qa`ida's campaign of violence, it ruled that armed resistance to foreign occupation was "allowed in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine." The LIFG leaders also deliberately decided not to mention al-Qa`ida by name in the document, judging that this might be counterproductive with their target audience of radical-leaning young Muslims.²³

Fifth, although the fact that the revisions were issued from prison has caused some to speculate that coercion was

21 Personal interviews, Noman Benotman, London, November 2007 and August 2009.

22 Personal interview, Noman Benotman, London, 2008; Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, CNN interview with Noman Benotman, London, 2009.

23 Personal interview, Noman Benotman, London, September 2009.

involved, current and former members of the group, including individuals living freely in the West, have insisted in interviews that the revisions are genuine.²⁴

Sixth, the revisions have received backing from some of the Muslim world's most prominent religious scholars, several of whom have significant legitimacy in jihadist circles. They include the Saudi cleric Salman al-Awda, who endorsed them on his popular website in the late summer, and the Egyptian cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who endorsed the revisions and the Libyan government's initiative in a Friday sermon screened on Qatari television in October.²⁵ According to Durman, "these scholars will have impact because of their geographic diversity and their weight in the Islamic arena where their words are listened to."²⁶ The LIFG leaders deliberately sought such endorsements because they realized that it would provide cover from critics pointing out that the revisions were authored from prison.²⁷

Seventh, the LIFG revisions represent arguably the most fundamental rethink ever by a jihadist group and are far more explicit in condemning violence than the revisions issued by al-Qa`ida's former Egyptian religious guide, Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, the spiritual leader of

Egyptian Islamic Jihad, from a Cairo prison two years ago. "It's an extremely radical change you know," Benotman told CNN. "You can't say it's just normal because violence it was like the heart of the group."²⁸ According to Durman, "We found no evidence in Qur'anic verses or the Prophet's sayings that our way was right—that it was right to carry arms and defy current laws."²⁹

Eighth, several top leaders of the LIFG have agreed to continue to preach out against al-Qa`ida after they are released from prison. For example, al-Sa`idi, the group's religious guide, plans to establish a center dedicated to combating extremism after his release.³⁰ Once the leaders are freed from prison it will be more difficult for radicals to argue that they are being coerced into repudiating al-Qa`ida. Al-Qa`ida will not welcome preachers such as al-Sa`idi taking to the airwaves. Still only in his early 40s, al-Sa`idi will likely find ways to connect with younger generations. Durman explained, "We will play our part in developing our country and, *insh'Allah*, be a force for good and a force against evil."³¹

Impact

It is still too early to measure the impact of the Libyan revisions. Any true test will take account not just of whether they reduce attack rates, but what attack rates in the region would likely have been if the LIFG had not embarked on a peace process. The fact that its leadership started talks in January 2007 at the height of the Iraq insurgency was significant. "Just imagine what would have gone down in Libya if the LIFG group had recruited and organized youngsters in the wake of the Iraq war," said Benotman.³² While much of the

group's leadership was in prison at the time, the anger caused by the Iraq war would have provided the group a great opportunity to launch a recruiting drive inside the country.³³

The LIFG revisions may already be making an impact on terrorism in North Africa. Counterterrorism officials believe that AQIM has been weakened in recent months because of intensified operations by Algerian security services.³⁴ According to Benotman, however, the weakening of the group may also be linked to a high-profile initiative taken by the Algerian government to distribute hundreds of copies of the LIFG revisions to radical hotspots.³⁵

The fact that scores of Libyans have volunteered to fight with AQIM in recent years means that it is in Algeria that the revisions may have their greatest impact. While tensions with their Algerian counterparts in the 1990s mean that the LIFG has few ties or influence over AQIM, the repudiation of AQIM tactics by a group enjoying significant prestige inside Libya will likely reduce the flow of Libyan recruits to its ranks. Moreover, Benotman claims to have dashed al-Zawahiri's hopes to recruit new Libyan militants and to have checked al-Qa`ida's momentum in the region.³⁶

The revisions appear to have influenced jihadist prisoners in Morocco and Mauritania as well. After the Libyan document was circulated in Moroccan prisons, Mohamed Abdel Wahhab Rafiki (also known as Abu Hafis), the leader of a Moroccan Salafi-jihadi faction, endorsed the revisions and called on

24 For example, Hani al-Siba`i, a hard-line Egyptian militant living in London in July 2009, accused the revisions of being processed in "the kitchens of tyrants." The author, however, spoke to at least a dozen LIFG members in Abu Salim prison in Tripoli in September 2009 about the revisions. One told him that while the fact they were in prison obviously affected what they could say, their commitment to the revisions was entirely genuine. Two London-based individuals—Noman Benotman, a former commander in the LIFG who acted as intermediary in the peace talks, and Abdul Ghani al-Amari, a mid-level LIFG member—also insisted the revisions were genuine in interviews the same month.

25 Other prominent scholars who endorsed the revisions were Muhammad Hasan Ould Dado of Mauritania, Ahmed Raysouni of Morocco and a half dozen leading Libyan clerics. For more, see "Salman al-Oudah Statement on Revisions," IslamToday.com, August 2009; Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Friday Khutbah, al-Jazira Mubasher, Qatar, October 16, 2009.

26 Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, CNN interview with Tarek Durman, Abu Salim prison, Tripoli, Libya, September 2009.

27 Personal interview, Noman Benotman, London, August 2009.

28 Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, CNN interview with Noman Benotman, London, 2009.

29 Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, CNN interview with Tarek Durman, Abu Salim prison, Tripoli, Libya, September 2009.

30 According to Saif Qadhafi, Abu al-Mundhir al-Sa`idi said he wants to preach to young Muslims so that they can learn from his mistakes. See Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, CNN interview with Saif Qadhafi, Tripoli, Libya, September 2009.

31 Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, CNN interview with Tarek Durman, Abu Salim prison, Tripoli, Libya, September 2009.

32 Personal interview, Noman Benotman, London, 2008.

33 The Iraq war had by 2007 contributed to a surge in radicalization inside Libya. Al-Qa`ida in Iraq's recruitment files, discovered by the U.S. military in a raid in Sinjar near the Syrian border, suggested that between August 2006 and August 2007 per capita Libyans made up the largest number of foreign-born suicide bombers in Iraq. For details, see Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qaida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008).

34 "Al Qaeda Africa Wing Less a Threat to Europe, US," Reuters, November 18, 2009.

35 Personal interview, Noman Benotman, December 2009.

36 Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, CNN interview with Noman Benotman, London, 2009.

the Moroccan government to initiate a similar process.³⁷ In Mauritania, 23 imprisoned Islamist militants issued a statement in late November rejecting violence against the state.³⁸ The breakthroughs could further isolate al-Qa`ida in North Africa.

The LIFG peace process may also have had implications in the West. Despite early opposition to the talks, the approximately 30 LIFG members living in the United Kingdom threw their weight behind the *shura* council in July. Their number included several senior members of the group and 12 individuals once subject to UK government "control orders" because of their threat to national security. As a result of the Libyan peace process, all but one of the "control orders" were dropped.³⁹ The support for the peace process by UK-based leaders signals that al-Qa`ida has lost the battle to win the hearts and minds of LIFG members worldwide.⁴⁰

37 "Jihadist Salafi Prisoners Value Reviews of Libyan Islamic Group," statement by Mohamed Abdel Wahhab Rafiki, September 30, 2009; Personal interview, Noman Benotman, December 2009. Not all Moroccan jihadist prisoners have endorsed the revisions. On October 20, 2009, the London-based Egyptian militant Hani al-Siba`i posted a statement claiming that another Moroccan prison faction opposed the revisions.

38 The Mauritanian prisoners appear to have been influenced by the Mauritanian cleric Muhammad Hasan Ould Dado, a key supporter of the LIFG revisions. See "Imprisoned Mauritanian Salafis Reject Anti-State Violence," Middle East Media Research Institute, November 26, 2009.

39 Control orders are a British administrative measure placing severe restrictions on the movement and communications of individuals judged to pose a potential threat to national security. Around a dozen individuals continue to be subject to them. Seven UK-based members of the LIFG had their control orders dropped after peace talks were initiated in Tripoli and four had orders dropped against them after the revisions were published. British security services distributed copies of the revisions to these latter individuals because of their lack of access to the internet. Personal interview, Libyan source, November 2009; Duncan Gardham, "Terrorism Suspects Released from House Arrests after Peace Deal," *Daily Telegraph*, November 13, 2009.

40 On November 3, 2007, al-Qa`ida released a videotape in which Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Laith al-Libi, a senior figure in the LIFG, announced that the LIFG had formally joined forces with al-Qa`ida, a clear play for the hearts and minds of the group's rank-and-file members.

Al-Qa`ida has thus far not officially commented on the LIFG revisions. According to Benotman, al-Zawahiri is maintaining a strategic silence because he does not want to draw more attention to the document since he fears the consequences.⁴¹ For al-Qa`ida, the revisions are even more problematic because several of its top leaders operating out of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region are former members of the LIFG. For Abu Yahya al-Libi, currently al-Qa`ida's chief propagandist, the rebuke from the LIFG was personal because his brother, `Abd al-Wahhab Qa'id, is one of the authors. Mid-level LIFG commander Tarek Durman said that he expects Abu Yahya to "not react to this event," something which may weaken al-Qa`ida's ability to counter the LIFG's arguments.⁴²

Benotman predicts that al-Qa`ida will be finished as a force in the Middle East and North Africa within the next half decade, in no small part because an increasingly critical mass of jihadists agrees with the initiative taken by the LIFG: "We are starting to see statements from the Islamic fighting groups themselves. They are supporting the idea. A couple years ago they were completely against that...Now I hope we will start to see a new era."⁴³ The Libyan revisions, said Benotman, will "challenge terrorists for a generation."⁴⁴

Paul Cruickshank is a Fellow at the NYU Center on Law & Security and the Producer of "The Jihadi Code," a recently aired CNN documentary on the Libyan revisions. During the last two years, Mr. Cruickshank and CNN Senior International Correspondent Nic Robertson gained exclusive access to the main players in the peace process and this past summer filmed interviews with leading figures of the LIFG inside Abu Salim prison in Tripoli.

41 Personal interview, Noman Benotman, Washington, D.C., October 2009.

42 Personal interview, Tarek Durman, Abu Salim prison, Tripoli, Libya, September 2009.

43 Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, CNN interview with Noman Benotman, 2009.

44 Personal interview, Noman Benotman, December 2009.

Assessing the Progress of Pakistan's South Waziristan Offensive

By Rahimullah Yusufzai

IN OCTOBER 2009, after approximately four months of preparations, Pakistan's armed forces launched a highly anticipated ground offensive against Taliban militants in South Waziristan Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The objectives of the mission, called Rah-e-Nijat (Path to Deliverance), are to clear the area of terrorists and militants and stabilize the region.¹ The current offensive in South Waziristan marks the largest military operation to date in both FATA and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP).

Pakistan's government considers South Waziristan the primary source of recent terrorist violence targeting the state. It alleges that 80% of terrorist attacks in Pakistan have been organized by militants from Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a conglomeration of Pakistani Taliban groups headquartered in South Waziristan.² Government officials finally came to the conclusion that it was essential to destroy the TTP network, which is currently led by Hakimullah Mehsud.³

This article will offer an account of the offensive thus far, identify its successes and failures, and finally look at the government's strategy moving forward.

The Offensive Begins

South Waziristan, spread over 2,419 square kilometers of vast and rugged terrain, has been under the effective control of Pakistani Taliban militants since 2003-2004. As a result, Pakistan's government does not have credible intelligence about the strength of local and foreign militants based in the area.

1 Amir Wasim, "Zardari Writes to NWFP Governor," *Dawn*, December 1, 2009.

2 Sajjad Shaukat, "Rationale Behind Waziristan Operation," *Pakistan Observer*, October 21, 2009; Khalid Qayum and Farhan Sharif, "Bombing Kills 19 in Peshawar as Pakistan Captures Taliban Bases," *Bloomberg*, November 19, 2009.

3 For a profile of Hakimullah Mehsud, see Mukhtar A. Khan, "A Profile of the TTP's New Leader: Hakimullah Mehsud," *CTC Sentinel* 2:10 (2009).