

LIBYAN ISLAMIC FIGHTING GROUP (LIFG)

As the crisis in Libya has unfolded in recent weeks, there has been concern over potential links between rebel fighters and al-Qaeda affiliated groups. One such group is the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). This fact sheet provides a brief overview of the LIFG.

- ▶ The LIFG is an Islamic terrorist group that opposes Colonel Muammar Qaddafi's regime and has been active since 1995.¹
- ▶ The group is most active in eastern Libya, drawing upon a strong Islamic base that supported the Sanussi monarchy, which ruled Libya between 1951 and 1969.² The Islamic community was marginalized after Qaddafi's forces overthrew the monarchy in 1969, as Qaddafi saw them as a potential challenge to his control.³
- ▶ Several senior members of the LIFG are reported to have fought in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union in the 1980s, including former LIFG member and al-Qaeda field commander Abu Laith al-Libi and LIFG spiritual leader Sami al Saadi.⁴
- ▶ The LIFG is believed to have been involved in violence in eastern Libya – a region historically known as Cyrenaica – in the mid to late 1990s. It claimed responsibility for violent clashes with police in Benghazi during July and September 1995, and were involved in the bloody riots at Abu Salim prison near Benghazi in 1996 that killed over 1,200 prisoners.⁵
- ▶ The U.S. Department of the Treasury designated the LIFG as a Foreign Terrorist Organization on December 8, 2004, citing the group's involvement in a series of suicide bombings in Casablanca in May 2003 and close linkages to al-Qaeda.⁶
- ▶ The LIFG had support networks active in the United Kingdom in the early 2000s.⁷ In February and May of 2006, British police arrested nine people involved in providing financial and logistical support to the LIFG in Libya.⁸ It is not clear in open source reporting if such support networks remain operational; while there are virtually no reports of LIFG activity in the UK since the May 2006 arrests, a dual British-Libyan national who was arrested in Libya in March 2011 claimed to have raised money for the LIFG while living in the UK during the last fourteen years.⁹
- ▶ In November 2007, al-Qaeda second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri released an audio tape announcing that the LIFG had joined al-Qaeda. Abu Laith al-Libi is also heard on the tape, proclaiming his "alliance with the al-Qaeda network."¹⁰
- ▶ Several high ranking al-Qaeda members are associated with the LIFG, most notably Abu Yahya al-Libi, al-Qaeda's propaganda chief, and Abu Laith al-Libi, who was killed by a drone strike in January 2008.¹¹
- ▶ The LIFG appeared to be largely defunct by the mid-2000s, until documents captured in Sinjar, Iraq showed that over 100 Libyans from LIFG strongholds in eastern Libya had joined al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) between 2006 and 2007.¹²
- ▶ In 2007, Saif al-Islam Qaddafi, Colonel Qaddafi's second oldest son, approached imprisoned LIFG leaders and offered to release LIFG fighters in exchange for the public repudiation of Islamic extremism. Saif al-Islam was concerned that the recent LIFG alliance with al-Qaeda and the discovery of extensive Libyan involvement in AQI indicated that Libya was increasingly threatened by Islamic extremism. Beginning in 2007, over 250 LIFG members were released from prison and a new code of conduct contradicting al-Qaeda's violent principles was published by the LIFG leadership.¹³

- The LIFG has not been particularly active in recent years, and is not reported to have significant connections to al-Qaeda's regional affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).
- It is unlikely that the LIFG constitutes a significant portion of the Libyan rebel forces. NATO commander Admiral James Stavridis, speaking before the Senate Armed Services Committee, downplayed the presence of extremist groups amongst the rebels and there have been few news reports indicating that groups allied with al-Qaeda are present in large numbers.¹⁴

NOTES

¹ "Police, Moslem militants clash in Libya: witnesses." Agence France Presse, September 7, 1995; "Libya denies clashes with Moslem militants." Agence France Presse, September 7, 1995; "Libyan police arrest dozens after deadly clash." Agence France Presse, September 8, 1995; "Islamists aim to oust Gaddafi." The Guardian, October 20, 1995; "A Libyan version of Algeria's GIA?" Mideast Mirror, October 21, 1995. "Interview with the spokesperson for the Fighting Islamic Group in Libya – Brother Omar Rashed." Nida'ul Islam, April-May 1995. "State Department issues statement on designations of foreign terrorist organizations, additions of groups to terrorist exclusion list." U.S. Department of State, December 28, 2004.

² "Libyan police arrest dozens after deadly clash." Agence France Presse, September 8, 1995; "Travelers arriving in Egypt say US-based opposition behind unrest in Cyrenaica." MBC TV, March 25, 1996; "Libya's Gadhafi sends army, security forces against restive east." AP, March 27, 1995. "Destination: Martyrdom; What drove so many Libyans to volunteer as suicide bombers for the war in Iraq? A visit to their hometown, Darnah, provides some answer." Newsweek, May 12, 2008; "Diehard in Derna." Wikileaks Department of State Cable, June 2, 2008.

³ Vandewalle, Dirk. *Libya since Independence: Oil and State-Building*. Cornell University Press, 1998.

⁴ "Al-Qaeda figure is killed in Pakistan; senior commander blamed in bombing at U.S. Afghan base." Washington Post, February 1, 2008; "Profile: Abu Laith al-Libi." BBC, January 31, 2008. "Former militants wage a new battle in native Libya; through religion-based rehab effort, country tries to weaken al-Qaeda's pull." Washington Post, May 31, 2010. "Libya to release bin Laden driver amongst Islamists." Agence France Presse, August 31, 2010.

⁵ "Police, Moslem militants clash in Libya: witnesses." Agence France Presse, September 7, 1995; "Libya denies clashes with Moslem militants." Agence France Presse, September 7, 1995; "Libyan police arrest dozens after deadly clash." Agence France Presse, September 8, 1995; "Islamists aim to oust Gaddafi." The Guardian, October 20, 1995; "Libya's 'Fighting Islamic Group' claims responsibility for clashes with gov't forces." Mideast Mirror, March 28, 1996. "New Jihad code threatens al-Qaeda." CNN, November 9, 2009.

⁶ "State Department issues statement on designations of foreign terrorist organizations, additions of groups to terrorist exclusion list." U.S. Department of State, December 28, 2004.

⁷ "Terror suspects cannot be deported to Libya, says court." The Daily Telegraph, April 28, 2007.

⁸ "Treasury designates UK-based individuals, entities financing al-Qaeda-affiliated LIFG." U.S. Department of the Treasury, February 8, 2006; "British man accused of funding al-Qaeda appears in court on immigration charges." AP, February 10, 2006; "Ten arrested in British anti-terror swoop." Agence France Presse, May 24, 2006; "British police stage raids, netting 8 terror suspects." The New York Times, May 25, 2006.

⁹ "Libyan arrested in uprising denies any link to Al-Qaeda." Los Angeles Times, March 16, 2011; "British man detained in Libya: Foreign Office." Agence France Presse, March 16, 2011.

¹⁰ "Zawahiri urges attacks on Western targets in Maghreb." Agence France Presse, November 3, 2007.

¹¹ While Abu Laith al-Libi is directly implicated as a senior leader in the LIFG before becoming an al-Qaeda field commander, Abu Yahya's affiliation is less certain. He is alternately described as having been a member of the LIFG and having been the younger brother of an LIFG commander. "Zawahiri urges attacks on Western targets in Maghreb." Agence France Presse, November 3, 2007. "Al-Qaeda figure is killed in Pakistan; senior commander blamed in bombing at U.S. Afghan base." Washington Post, February 1, 2008; "Profile: Abu Laith al-Libi." BBC, January 31, 2008. "Al-Qaeda's new leadership: Abu Yahya al-Libi, Religious Scholar." Washington Post, 2006. "Rising leader for next phase of al-Qaeda's War." The New York Times, April 4, 2008.

¹² Colonel Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman. "Al-Qa'ida's foreign fighters in Iraq: A first look at the Sinjar Records." Harmony Project, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2008.

¹³ "In bid to thwart al-Qaeda, Libya frees three leaders of jihadist group." CNN, March 23, 2010; "Libyan charity: 90 members of al-Qaida-linked group set free from Libyan jail." AP, April 9, 2008; "Libya frees 126 Islamists close to Qaeda." Agence France Presse, March 11, 2009; "Libyan Islamic Fighting Group completes ideological revisions." Al-Jazeera, August 2, 2009; "88 repentant Libyan militants released." AP, October 15, 2009; "New jihad code threatens al-Qaeda." CNN, November 9, 2009; "Libyan group denounces bin Laden ideology." CNN, November 16, 2009; "Militant deal opens door for new Libya." CNN, November 23, 2009; "Libyan authorities reportedly release 15 fighting group prisoners." Al-Hayat, February 26, 2010; "In bid to thwart al-Qaeda, Libya frees three leaders of jihadist group." CNN, March 23, 2010; "Libya releases 214 Islamic militants." AP, March 24, 2010; "Former militants wage a new battle in native Libya: through religion based rehab effort, country tries to weaken al-Qaeda's pull." Washington Post, May 31, 2010; "Libya releases 37 Islamists from Prison." The Tripoli Post, September 8, 2010.

¹⁴ Public statements from the U.S. government about LIFG and al-Qaeda involvement in the recent violent have largely been limited to remarks made by Admiral James Stavridis, NATO and EUROCOMM Commander. News reports definitively claiming al-Qaeda involvement largely reference the listed Telegraph story. "'Flickers' of al-Qaeda in Libyan opposition, U.S. NATO leader says." CNN, March 29, 2011; Swami, Praveen. "Libyan rebel commander admits his fighters have al-Qaeda links." The Telegraph, March 25, 2011.