‘The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group’ (LIFG)¹
By Moshe Terdman*

Introduction -- The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group²

In the 1990s Islamism found a strong popular following in Libya. Despite its oil wealth, the country has suffered from chronic socio-economic problems brought about by a combination of economic mismanagement, falling oil prices and the international sanctions that were imposed upon Libya in 1992. With no other political alternative, the public was ripe for radical brand of political Islam that was sweeping the entire region. The Muslim Brotherhood gathered more support, while a number of new groups also sprang up.

These new groups included the Islamic Gathering (Harakat Al-Tajammu` Al-Islami), founded by Mustafa Ali al-Jihani. Its supporting base was almost entirely in the east of Libya.

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¹ This article opens a series of papers on “Radical Islamism and Islamist Movements in Africa.” This new project of PRISM is aimed at researching and analyzing the Islamist phenomenon in North, Black, and South Africa, which so far has not been researched enough.

² This is a preliminary report based on the website of this Libyan group. Its address is: http://www.almuqatila.com The web site is registered in Amman/Jordan by Sam Reched, email address: libyanway@gmail.com and was created in 7 August 2000.

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Another group that succeeded in drawing a following mainly in the western areas at this time was the missionary non-militant Tabligh group (*Jama'at al-Da’wah wal-Tabligh*). Tabligh, however, chose to distance itself from politics, after some of its numbers had been arrested in the late 1980s and became co-opted by the regime, some of them being given posts as imams or preachers of Friday sermons.

Other, more militant groups also appeared on the scene in the 1990s, made up largely of veterans of the war in Afghanistan. These included the LIFG and the much smaller and less well known groups that mostly consisted of a leader (emir) and a handful of followers, such as *Harakat al-Shuhada’ al-Islamiyyah* (Libyan Islamic Martyrs Movement), headed by al-Hami; and *Ansar Allah* (supporters of Allah). The LIFG stood out among these groups because it tried to bring all of the militant groups under its wing to create a more united front against the regime, but to no avail.3

### History

The exact date of the formation of The LIFG (*al-Jama'a al-Islamiyyah al-Muqatilah fi-Libya*) is unknown because a formal declaration of its establishment did not come until October 1995. The LIFG traces its origins, to the clandestine jihadist organization established in Libya in 1982, and currently led by Awatha al-Zuwawi. This small organization had contacts with Islamic movements outside Libya, especially in Afghanistan, where many of its members went. Among them was Zuwawi himself, who spent number of weeks in Afghanistan in 1986, before returning to Libya. In Afghanistan these Jihadists honed their fighting skills in guerilla warfare. There, they were also exposed to Islamist scholars such as 'Abdallah 'Azzam, many of whose writings are posted on the group's site.

It seems that the Libyan fighters in Afghanistan established the LIFG in 1992. At the same time, the LIFG seems to have formed a basis infrastructure in Libya proper, from which they began to plan activities against the regime of Mu’ammar Qadhafi. Most of the founding leaders and cadres of the LIFG were members of the organization formed by Zuwawi. By 1985–1986 Zuwawi had many university educated people around him, in particular Sheikh Abu Mundher Sa’adi, who is the group's spiritual leader. Sa’adi was detained by the Americans in Hong Kong in 2004, along with the then leader of the

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LIFG—Abdallah Sadeq, who was captured in Bangkok. Later, both were handed over to the Libyan authorities.  

Several factors led to the formation of the LIFG. Firstly, the propagation of a unique version of the Islamic faith by Mu'ammar Qadhafi, through his “green book,”—in a region where even slight deviations from religious orthodoxy are taboo; second, the resentment felt deeply by educated Libyans to the regime's heterodox religious orientation, conspicuous corruption and economic mismanagement with the decline of oil prices in the 1980s; third, soaring unemployment, shortages of goods, and other economic illnesses stemming from the imposition of UN sanctions in 1992. All of these factors made conditions in Libya ripe for an Islamist takeover.

In June 1995 militants, disguised as members of Qadhafi's Revolutionary Committees, launched an operation to free a detained comrade from a hospital. Weeks later, they stormed a prison in Benghazi and released more of their comrades. Fierce clashes between security forces and LIFG's members erupted in Benghazi in September 1995, leaving dozens killed on both sides. After weeks of intense fighting the LIFG formally declared its existence in a communiqué. This and future LIFG communiqués were issued by Libyan Afghan veterans who had been granted political asylum in Britain, were anti-Qadhafi sentiments stemming from the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, soared. The involvement of the British government in the LIFG campaign against Qadhafi remains the subject of immense controversy. The next big operation of the LIFG was a failed attempt to assassinate Qadhafi in February 1996 that killed several of his bodyguards.

The conflict continued to escalate in 1996. In March, several dozen Islamist detainees escaped from al-Kuwaifiyyah prison near Benghazi and fled into the mountains of northeastern Libya, where security forces in hot pursuit came under attack by LIFG guerillas. In June, LIFG fighters killed eight policemen at a training center near the town of Derna, east of Benghazi. In July, the government carried out massive arrest sweeps throughout the country and launched a major air and ground assault on LIFG mountain bases. In November, a LIFG operative hurled a grenade at Qadhafi during his visit to the desert town of Brak. Qadhafi escaped uninjured.

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4 An interview between Mahan Abedin, correspondent of the Jamestown Terrorism Monitor, and Nu’man Bin Othman, A former member of the Shura committee of the LIFG conducted in March 15, 2005. See on-line in:  
Although LIFG attacks on military and police outposts continued intermittently over the next few years, the government gradually gained the upper hand by imposing martial law on the Derna region and instituting a range of draconian measures to intimidate its inhabitants into submission. LIFG received a major blow in October 1997, when one of its most capable commanders, Salah Fathi bin Salman (a.k.a. Abu Abd al-Rahman Khattab), was killed in fighting with security forces. In the summer of 1998, the government launched a major assault on the group's remaining hideouts in the northeast and rounded up scores of alleged sympathizers throughout the country.

Following the 9/11 attacks, a CIA team flew to London to meet face to face with the head of Libyan intelligence, Musa Kusa. He provided the CIA with the names of LIFG operatives and other Libyan Islamists who trained in Afghanistan, as well as dossiers on LIFG leaders living in the United Kingdom. The U.S. State Department officially designated LIFG as a terrorist organization. That Britain has not designated LIFG a terrorist organization is significant, as several prominent leaders of the group continue to live and act in London and Manchester.

Whether LIFG continues to pose a major threat to Qadhafi remains unclear. Yet, LIFG guerillas still maintain a modest presence in the mountains of northeastern Libya.  

Structure of the LIFG
Until April 1994, the LIFG was led by Abu Abdallah al-Sadeq, a Libyan citizen born in Tripoli. A student in engineering at Tripoli University, he went to Afghanistan the late 1980s, where he was wounded. From there he returned to Libya, where he based himself in the eastern part of the country and personally supervised the organization of the group. In 1994 he oversaw the planning and execution of the failed assassination attempt on Qadhafi in Derna. Sadeq is wanted by the Libyan regime, which has failed to capture him until today. He is also the head of the political bureau (al-Maktab al-Siyāsī) of the group. Its role is to supervise the political activity in the group, including the planning and execution of operations.

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5 This part is based upon the special issue of Jamestown Terrorism Monitor (Vol. 3, Issue 6) from March 24, 2005). See on-line in:  

6 See on-line in:  
http://www.almuqatila.com/intervews/rashidspeed.htm  
http://www.almuqatila.com/maktab_seyase/bayanat/bayan15.htm
LIFG is ruled by a Majlis Shura (consultative committee) and according to its charter the Shura committee needs a quorum of seven people for its decisions to be legally binding. Usually there were up to fifteen people in the Shura at any given point in time.\(^7\)

Another body within this group is the judicial committee (\textit{al-Lajnah al-Shar'iyyah}), which is responsible for all judicial issues as well as for the education of the LIFG and training propagandist and religious scholars. The committee is also tasked with issuing judicial writings. Furthermore, the committee takes an interest in the ‘proper conduct’ of Libyan society at large, and accordingly issues messages and articles criticizing tendencies deemed negative from an Islamist point of view. This committee is divided into three branches: research and study (\textit{Far' al-Dirāsāt wal-Buhūth}); propaganda and guidance (\textit{Far' al-D’awah wal-Irshād}); judicial matters (\textit{Far' al-Iftā’ wal-Qadha’}).\(^8\)

The information bureau is the third body within the LIFG. It publishes open letters to the Libyan people, calling upon the nation to devote itself to the Islamic faith. It also clarifies to Libyans the situation of the struggle between the Islamists and the Qadhafi regime and its purposes.\(^9\) The current spokesman of the LIFG is Omar Rāshid.

**Targets and activity method**

On 18 October 1995, following a series of attacks against the regime, the LIFG published its first communiqué, in which it declared its existence for the first time. It does not mean that the group was established then and there. The LIFG was established earlier but this communiqué marked the transition of the group from a clandestine to an official Jihadist activist against the Qadhafi regime.\(^10\)

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\(^9\) [http://www.almuqatila.com/intervews/shareefalhayat.htm](http://www.almuqatila.com/intervews/shareefalhayat.htm)

\(^10\) For the first proclamation of the LIFG see on-line in: [http://www.almuqatila.com/maktab_seyase/bayanat/bayan1.htm](http://www.almuqatila.com/maktab_seyase/bayanat/bayan1.htm)
The LIFG engraves on its flag the jihad against Qadhafi and his regime in order “to save the Libyan Muslims from the oppression, tyranny and even more importantly, from the deviation of Qadhafi from true Islam,” as it sees it. In its first communiqué the LIFG called upon the Libyans to assist the group in its struggle against the regime, to support its activities, and to believe in pure Islam. The group also expressed its solidarity with other jihadist groups all over the world.11

In its initial communiqué the LIFG defines itself in typical Salafist form, as an Islamic group whose aim is to engage in a holy war against the enemies of Allah. These foes include in particular the Arab sovereigns and Qadhafi at their helm, who do not abide by the Shari'a and the Sunnah. The aim of the LIFG is the struggle for the restoration of an Islamic regime in Libya based on Shari’ah law, under the leadership of the LIFG. This purpose can be achieved by jihad and propaganda. Engaging in this holy war against Qadhafi is a duty of every Libyan Muslim capable of bearing arms.12

The LIFG’s method of operation is based on five principles: preparation of the members for future actions against the regime; clandestine activity; propagating Jihad and struggle against Qadhafi; supporting other jihadist movements all over the world; and, finally, financing its activities from its own sources.13

The Ideological Roots of the Group
On its website, the LIFG calls upon Muslims inside and outside of Libya to take part in what it terms the fight of Islam against its enemies. The aim of this fight, the LIFG believes, is to defend a faith dominated by the laws of the heretics. A book published on its website and written by Abu al-Mundhir Sami al-Sa'idi, one of the group's religious scholars, provides an elaborate legitimation of the existence of the LIFG. In his book al-Sa'idi refers to the sayings of other radical Muslim religious scholars, such as the Saudi Shaikh Safar al-Hawali, who argues that the lay ruler is a Jahili ruler, not an Islamic one, and therefore, must be considered to be a heretic. He also refers to Shaikh Omar al-Ashqar, who holds that those Arab rulers have forcibly imposed heretic

11 http://www.almuqatila.com/maktab_seyase/bayanat/bayan1.htm
12 http://www.almuqatila.com/taaref/indix.htm
   http://www.almuqatila.com/infrmthon/mubreerat.htm
13 For the general policy of the LIFG as described in its site, see on-line in: http://www.almuqatila.com/taaref/seysa.htm
rules, and fight against all those who call for the implementation of the Islamic Shari'ah. He concludes that since there is nothing connecting these leaders to Islam, it is the duty of every Muslim to fight these Jahilis.

On the issue of the struggle of radical Muslims against those they believe to be heretical rulers, al-Sa'idi focused mainly on two Islamist scholars -- Abdallah Azzam and Sa'id Qutb, both of whom are no longer alive. Azzam and Qutb both regarded those rulers who imported the ideas of nationalism from the West while shunning a lifestyle in accordance with Shari’ah law as heretics and called every Muslim to fight against them. Therefore, it may well be that the legitimization of the LIFG’s existence derives from the teachings of religious scholars that support al-Qaeda, as well as from Sayyed Qutb. This is not surprising given that the majority of the LIFG's activists stem from Afghanistan, where they absorbed the teachings of Abdallah Azzam and other al-Qaeda scholars. As for Sayyed Qutb, he influenced most, if not all, doctrines of contemporary radical Islamic organizations, amongst them the ideology of the LIFG. Beside these two there are other Islamist scholars who have influenced LIFG, such as Shaikh Muhammad al-Shankiti, Abd al-Rahman Abd al-Khaleq, and Muhammad al-Saleh al-`Uthaymin, who are prominent in supporting al-Qaeda.

In this sense, another role of the LIFG is to free the Libyan population from the slavery of Qadhafi's regime. In this way, the LIFG constitutes the bridge between the organs of the Islamic homeland located inside Libya and outside it.

Indeed, closer look of the publications of the judicial committee, reveals that the bulk of the published information is, in one way or another, connected to issues of war, spying, holy war and suicide operations, or to issues of religion, such as the duty of women and prayer. This phenomenon can also be seen in the fatwas, for example in the issues of how to define the Christians and how to treat them.

The holy war of the LIFG has won the aid and judicial support of major Islamic religious scholars, amongst them Abdallah Azzam and Shaikh Nasser al-Albani, who

14 See on-line in: 
http://www.almuqatila.com/deen_almuqatila/bohoot/khtot1.doc

15 http://www.almuqatila.com/index/kalema.com

16 http://www.almuqatila.com/deen_almuqatila/fatwa/mawkaf.htm 
http://www.almuqatila.com/deen_almuqatila/bohwt.htm
issued a *fatwa*, in which they called Qadhafi heretic and made it the duty of every Muslim to fight against him. In this sense, the LIFG is not a local Libyan group, but one link in the radical Islamic chain spread all over the Arab and Moslem world.

**Conclusion – A Local Libyan Islamist Group or Part of al-Qaeda?**

Although the LIFG is a Libyan Islamist opposition group, it does not necessarily mean that it does not express solidarity with other radical Islamist groups and activists. On 31 May 1997, for example, the group sent a supporting letter to Sheikh Omar Abd al-Rahman who is jailed by the United States because of his involvement in terrorist activity.\(^\text{17}\) It also published some communiqués in which it expressed solidarity with Sudan, Afghanistan, the Palestinians and Iraq, and called their followers to fight against the American and Israeli aggression.\(^\text{18}\)

Despite this solidarity, the LIFG published two communiqués, one on 6 June 1996 and the second on 1 October 1997, in which it reneged from its support for the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA), because it “deviated from the principles of jihad as well as those of the Shari'a.” The real motive behind this declaration was the conflicts within the Algerian group between its leadership on the one hand, and its veteran Afghan members, on the other. The leadership wished to get rid of all Afghan veterans. The LIFG, which was established by Afghan veterans, did not like this at all. Besides, the LIFG condemned the murder and killing of innocent civilians by members of the group since it considers most Algerians as heretics.\(^\text{19}\)

The LIFG, however, does not have to look internationally to find examples worthy of emulation. Local Islamist heroes from the past, such as Omar al-Mukhtart, are useful role models. Al-Mukhtart, who was hanged by the Italians in 1931, is a legend among Libyan Islamists because he was firm in his religious beliefs at a time when the leaders of his country surrendered to the Italians. Many of the most senior scholars of his time from the Sannousies did not come to his aid, but instead turned their loyalty to the Italians. Omar took his Qur'an, held it and gave an oath that he would not stop fighting

\(^\text{17}\) [http://www.almuqatila.com/maktab_seyase/omarabdrahman.htm](http://www.almuqatila.com/maktab_seyase/omarabdrahman.htm)
the occupying oppressors even if it meant fighting them alone until victory had been attained or he becomes a martyr.\textsuperscript{20}

In order to convince the Libyans to join its struggle against Qadhafi, the group stresses that this struggle is not a personal or tribal one, but one between the real Islam and the heretics, at the helm of which stands Mu’ammar Qadhafi himself. This struggle is a direct continuity of the past struggle of the Islamists against the Italians.\textsuperscript{21}

To summarize, the LIFG regards itself as an Islamist national organization, with local Libyan roots. It denies connections to al-Qaeda or to another international jihadist organizations, and even condemned the 9/11 attacks.\textsuperscript{22} It does, however, show solidarity with other Islamist battles in the Muslim world, such as the present one conducted against “the Crusaders” in Iraq. Its tone and language, however, is different from those of the typical groups that constitute Global Jihad. According to a list of 55 members of the group killed as Shuhada, most of them were killed in Libya itself or in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{23} The list ends in 2001, and no new names have been added since then. This may lead to the conclusion that the LIFG did not take part in Islamist struggles in recent years, not even in Iraq.

It seems as if the group has “frozen” its ideology and doctrines since 2001-2002, and is not affected by the dynamics of global Jihad. Just recently, on 18 May 2005, the group published a short declaration about the story of the “abused” Quran in the American detainee camp in Guantanamo.\textsuperscript{24} The document is not written in the typical tone of the Jihadi-Salafi groups, and does not even make a call to fight the United States.

\textsuperscript{20} http://www.almuqatila.com/maktab_seyase/omaralmukhtar.htm
http://www.almuqatila.com/infrmthon/ulama.htm

\textsuperscript{21} http://www.almuqatila.com/infrmthon/resala.htm

\textsuperscript{22} An interview with Nu’man bin `Uthman, March 2005. See on-line in:

\textsuperscript{23} See on-line in: http://www.almuqatila.com/shuhdaa/index.htm

\textsuperscript{24} See on-line in: http://www.almuqatila.com/maktab_seyase/quran.htm