

This is an ICSR Insight by Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, ICSR Research Fellow

*Western internet jihadists are portraying Libya as the newest front in the global jihad against the West, in line with dictates from the al-Qaeda leadership. They are providing internet forum members with what they claim to be exclusive pictures of mujahideen from the front lines, and are imploring them to travel to Libya and fight. However, their claims are unconvincing and there are notable discrepancies between their interpretation of events and the facts on the ground.*

### **Introduction: Al-Qaeda claiming ownership, despite evidence to the contrary**



Despite being initially sluggish and incoherent, al-Qaeda's response to the Arab Spring is now taking shape. Senior leadership figures, including Ayman al-Zawahiri and Libyan born Abu Yahya al-Libi, as well as a many lesser known Salafi-jihadi ideologues, have given a number of sermons concentrating almost solely on Libya and portraying it as the most fertile ground for their global movement. Their Western followers are making a similar case on Salafi-jihadi internet forums.

It is well-known that Eastern Libya has been a source of al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism in the recent past, with a number of Libyans travelling to Iraq to join the insurgency there. However, any concrete evidence of a strong al-Qaeda presence among the rebels remains scarce, and reliable sources in the country have reported little to no serious Islamist activity within the rebel camp.

On 30 March 2011, the Libyan Interim Transitional National Council attempted to allay Western fears about the profile of the anti-Gaddafi forces by releasing a statement in which they pledged their 'commitment to the implementation of the relevant Security Council resolutions on Counter-Terrorism, including the resolutions on the Sanctions concerning al-Qaeda and Taliban'.

This has caused much consternation among the Western Salafi-jihadi movement, which is attempting to take ownership of the rebellion on behalf of the global jihad, and is portraying anti-Gaddafi forces as *mujahideen*, while also encouraging Western Muslims to do all they can to reach the country and take part in a supposed jihad.

### **Al-Qaeda sympathisers calling for foreign fighters to join the rebel cause**

In late February, a number of the main English language Salafi-jihadi forums lit up with excitement

upon seeing media reports about the formation of anti-Gaddafi cadres in Libya. One story in particular caught their eye: an account about a band of Islamist gunmen who overran a Libyan Army base in al-Baida in the northeast of the country. Although it is likely that this claim was part of Gaddafi regime propaganda to delegitimise the rebellion, jihadi forum members chose to believe it, with one commenter exclaiming:

my brothers and sisters, we are facing a global change, *Alhamdulillah* [praise God]! We will see this uprising continuing in all Muslim countries and soon we will see the banner of *La ilaha ilallah* [there is no God but Allah] everywhere!

Another senior forum member framed the uprisings as part of the war between Islam and the West, and attempted to mobilise readers to join the rebels and help foment within the movement a revolutionary Salafi-jihadi zeal:

Who wants to join the Mujahideen? The gates of Jihad are open in Libya!

[...]

The market of paradise has opened and the hoor al ayn [virgins promised to martyrs] are waiting.

Where are the shabaab [Muslim youth]?

The same commenter also made a number of unverifiable claims about being in direct touch with Salafi-jihadi members of the rebellion, and continued to give regular 'breaking news' updates on the status of the 'jihad'. In late February he claimed that:

The Salafi brothers in Benghazi have declared the Islamic emirate of Libya. I have received exclusive news that the brothers gathered more than 4000–7000 fighters. The brothers have captured military tanks, Hummers, heavy/medium/light machine guns.

These updates are often followed by what are purported to be exclusive images of Libyan *mujahideen*, stamped with the official logo of the main al-Qaeda inspired forum. There is however, no clear evidence of Salafi-jihadi affiliation among the fighters in the pictures, many of which show them either armed, in prayer, or holding Korans aloft in celebration.

As questions flooded in from enthusiastic forum members eager to hear about the fate of their comrades, the senior member claimed that a number of 'Islamic battalions' have been formed under the names of: Umar al Mukhtaar Battalion; The Thunderbolt Battalion; and The Islamic Army of Benghazi. He remains hopeful for their cause, and further encourages readers to join the ranks:

The only thing we can do at this moment is pray for the brothers and wait the official declaration of an Islamic emirate in Libya.

The best way to reach Libya is by crossing the **Mediterranean** Sea. [His emphasis]

### **Pro Al-Qaeda western Salafi-jihadis are contrasting the 'pure' uprising in Libya with other recent manifestations of the 'Arab spring' which they condemn as secular and democratic**

Like the senior al-Qaeda leadership, many online Salafi-jihadis are beginning to place more emphasis on Libya. The senior member who claims contact with the rebels explains that 'the great thing about this revolution is that the people are only raising the banner of truth and shouting *takbeer* [the name for the phrase 'God is Great'], and unlike Egypt or Tunisia, 'nobody shouts a name of a secular/democratic party'.

In another post, he delves deeper, concentrating on the crucial differences between Libya and Egypt, explaining why the former is riper for a Salafi-jihadi revolution. From a strategic perspective, he notes that Libya's army was deliberately undersupplied by Gaddafi in order to avoid a coup, whereas the Egyptian army – which exists 'for the sake of Israel' – is the largest in the region. Ideologically, Libyan

Salafism is supposedly 'purer' than in Egypt, where it has long been corrupted by Sheikhs allied with the apostate Mubarak regime:

the Salafis of Libya don't follow their Scholars as if they are gods [sic] besides Allah. If you look at the Salafis of Egypt they are like androids who are installed with playback software. Everything what the "Salafi Scholars" say is the truth and the ONLY TRUTH. Their Scholars have said that protesting keeps you away from worshipping Allah. SubhanAllah! Overthrowing a Taghut [apostate regime] is the best worship which exist in our religion.

**However, concerns have been raised on online Salafi-jihadi forums about the Islamist credentials of the rebel fighters following requests for Western assistance**

Forum participants remain eager for further confirmation about the Salafi-jihadi affiliation of the rebels. Despite portraying much of the rebel organisation as al-Qaeda aligned, the senior member of the forum reminds other members not to expect immediate results from the event. Instead, Muslims should regard the overthrow of Gaddafi as a stepping stone in the wider Salafi-jihadi project, and it is their duty to ensure that their ideology is spread patiently and effectively:

We don't have enough patient [sic] when it comes to the establishment of an Islamic emirate...What we forget is that we first need to explain to our people what sharia law means.

[...]

If you ask the supporters of the *mujahideen* what they want, they will say an Islamic caliphate from Morocco to Indonesia. Why do we want this? is it because we were born with this idea? No! we want this because we watch jihadi videos and read Islamic books. We can never expect from the Libyan people to be Salafi jihadi in 7 days.

This analysis is similar to that of senior al-Qaeda ideologues, who believe that the removal of *taghut* leaders allied with the West is paramount, regardless of the ideological affiliation of the insurgents.

Another participant concurs, advising that Muslims use *hikma* [wisdom] and consider what the Western military reaction would be if the rebels announced any sort of al-Qaeda affiliation or sympathy:

Declaring Islamic emirate would make an invasion of *kuffar* [non-Muslim] forces imminent, to a fresh fragile Emirate, its better to build a state, army and economy, and make tarbiya [education] on the people so they understand Islam and the concept of khilafa, and THEN declare the Emirate, with weapons, economy and a people ready to fight for Allah...

By the end of March, after the Libyan rebel council requested Western military assistance, forum participants expressed grave concern about an alliance with the supposed 'enemies of Islam'. One member asks:

I really need some clarification on the current situation in Libya. Indeed we see images from Kuffaar news sources that the Libyans are requesting help from the kuffaar against Ghaddafi.

[...]

Could someone please confirm that there are *mujahedeen* in Libya on the straight path.

Echoing the views of many of the forum members, one commenter responded that much of the confusion surrounding the true nature of the rebels was a deliberate ploy by the Western media to prevent Muslims from knowing the truth:

The more you listen to mainstream media the more blurry it would get

[...]

Its so rare because men of truth are rare therefore their news is rare as well. However, people of falsehood are plenty that's why the airwaves are full of propaganda.

Al-Qaeda aligned internet forums therefore provide what appears for many participants to be an invaluable alternative media source for accurate and honest news about the Salafi-jihadi movement, and one member claims that without these 'I would have still been lost and confused in the dark'.

At this point, the senior member with supposed contacts to al-Qaeda moved to calm any fears of an alliance with the Crusaders by reminding them of the history of the Taliban's eventual takeover of Afghanistan, including the alliances made between rival factions in their pursuit of removing the Soviets:

[In Afghanistan] We had Sunnis, nationalist, Ikhwanis [Muslim Brotherhood], Sufis, Shi'tes and other groups fighting shoulder to shoulder against the Russians. What happened after the war? We witnessed a civil war between the groups.

[...]

the Students [Taliban] succeeded in taking 90% of Afghanistan. They declared the Islamic emirate and implemented the *Sharia*. I think that the same thing will happen in Libya.

The Libyans and Muslims around the world should therefore be patient and await Libya's 'Taliban moment', which will come with the help of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the North African al-Qaeda affiliate that he claims is preparing to begin operations in the country.

## Conclusions

Online Salafi-jihadis in the West are seeking to portray the Libyan uprising, and the Arab Spring in general, in much the same desperate way as the senior al-Qaeda leadership.

While they are attempting to take ownership of parts of the rebel movement in the name of the global Salafi-jihadi movement, they are also aware that the facts on the ground belie this claim.

The rebels' Interim Transitional National Council is clearly not an al-Qaeda aligned movement, and no amount of propaganda will convince many people otherwise. However, the forums claim that there is enough of a Salafi-jihadi presence to ensure that once Gaddafi is overthrown, Libya will begin to move toward transforming into an Islamic state governed by the *Sharia*.

By claiming to be in direct contact with al-Qaeda organisations in North Africa and elsewhere, the forums' administrators are seeking to gain a legitimacy which allows them to both provide Western Muslims with trusted alternative media sources and mobilise them to assist the *mujahideen* in Libya and the rest of the world.

Find out More +

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