



THE TERRORIST THREAT IN NORTH AFRICA **Before and After Benghazi**

Aaron Zelin

Richard Borow Fellow

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Written Testimony before House Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade and the
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

July 10, 2013

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the two committees for giving me the opportunity to testify today on the terrorist threat within and emanating from Libya. Currently, one can identify three interrelated, but unique threats:

- **Local:** Ansar al-Sharia in Libya,
- **Regional:** foreign fighter flows to Syria, and
- **Transnational:** al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib

Before discussing this, it is important to note that Libya has all types of violence and most is not related to jihadi organizations or those sympathetic to them. A large portion of it is militia-based, a legacy of the revolution against the Muammar Qadhafi regime, and related to local, economic, or political grievances.¹ This should be kept in mind when contextualizing jihadi violence in Libya, but is beyond the scope of this particular discussion.

Current State of Affairs

Ansar al-Sharia in Libya

Even as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) put down its arms after the war and joined the political process, new jihadi groups began to emerge.² The premier one has been Katibat Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi, which first announced itself in February 2012 and is led by Muhammad al-Zahawi, who had previously been an inmate of Qaddafi's infamous Abu Salim prison.³ The organization has since changed its name to Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL) to try and signify it is a national movement as well as no longer primarily a fighting force, though most of its activities are still confined to Benghazi.

ASL has loose ties to several smaller Salafi-jihadi *katibas* (battalions) in Libya, including the shadowy Ansar al-Sharia in Darnah (ASD), led by former Guantanamo Bay inmate Abu

¹ Geoff D. Porter, "The Attack on the U.S. Consulate: Emerging Signs of Jihadist Sentiment in Libya," *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 5 Issue 9, September 2012. Available at: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-attack-on-the-u-s-consulate-emerging-signs-of-jihadist-sentiment-in-libya>

² For more on this see the section on the LIFG in: Aaron Y. Zelin, "Islamism in Libya," in *The World Almanac of Islamism*, American Foreign Policy Council, 2013. Available at: <http://almanac.afpc.org/Libya>

³ Mary Fitzgerald, "It Wasn't Us," *Foreign Policy*, September 18, 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/18/it_wasn_t_us.

Sufyan bin Qumu. However, there is not much public record on Qumu's activities in the past two years or if he is even still in Darnah or hiding out in the mountains. ASL also has ties to Katibat Abu Ubaydah al-Jarah, and Saraya Raf Allah al-Sahati. Many of these *katibas* among others participated in ASL's first "annual conference" on June 6, 2012.⁴ Based on photos from the event, as many as a thousand individuals attended. At that time, it was believed that ASL had about few hundred members.⁵ Currently, the group has expanded and at its second annual conference two weeks ago, there were around two thousand people present, though ASL claimed 12,000 came.

The main reason ASL has grown is due primarily to its focus on dawa (missionary) activities. While many analysts view jihadism only through the prism of violence, it misses the influence of independent jihadi religious scholars. Since the excesses of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and al-Qaeda in Iraq last decade, Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad (the Pulpit of Monotheism and Jihad)—a library of jihadi primary source material founded by Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who is currently imprisoned in Jordan—has attempted to steer the jihadi community to a more "pure" jihad. To do this, Maqdisi established a sharia committee of like-minded scholars in 2009 for Minbar that provide fatwas answering questions along a range of topics from the mundane to political to jihad.⁶

One of the main critiques Maqdisi presents, and hopes to create a course correction within the jihadi movement, is his differentiation between the idea of *qital al-nikayya* (fighting to hurt or damage the enemy) and *qital al-tamkin* (fighting to consolidate one's power), which he expounds upon in his book *Waqafat ma Thamrat al-Jihad* (Stances on the Fruit of Jihad) in 2004. Maqdisi argues the former provides only short-term tactical victories that in many cases do not amount to much in the long-term whereas the latter provides a framework for consolidating an Islamic state. In this way, Maqdisi highlights the importance of planning, organization, education, as well as *dawa* (calling individuals to Islam) activities. As Wagemakers has noted, the creation of the Minbar sharia committee was to forward these views to "protect" the jihad and to better advance the pursuit of a true Islamic state based on the sanctity of the *tawhid* (monotheism) of God.

The formation of Ansar al-Sharia in Libya is likely a logical conclusion and implementation of Maqdisi's ideas, changing emphasis on the groups' actions. One of the main avenues for advancing ASL's ideas has been through their social services programs. This provides an outlet for advancing the consolidation of a future Islamic state that cultivates followers in a broader fashion than the more vanguard-oriented organizations that have been involved in jihadism in a local, regional, or global capacity over the past 30 years. Since the beginning of the Arab uprisings, it appears that al-Qaeda and its associated ideologues have taken note

⁴ The others that were at the conference included, the Islamic Foundation for Dawa and Islah, The Supreme Commission for the Protection of Revolution of February 17, Liwa Dara Libya, Katibat Shuhada Libya al-Hurrah, Katibat Faruq (Misrata), Katibat Thuwar Sirte, Katibat Shuhada al-Khalij al-Nawfaliya, Katibat Ansar al-Huriyya, Katibat Shuhada al-Qawarsha, Katibat al-Shahid Muhammad al-Hami, Katibat al-Jabal, Katibat al-Nur, Katibat Shuhada Abu Salim, Katibat Shuhada Benghazi, The Preventative Security Apparatus, Katibat al-Shahid Salih al-Nas, and other brigades from Darnah, Sabratha, Janzur, and Ajdabiya. You can view pictures of the conference here: <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.373188266078865.86838.156312127766481&type=1>

⁵ Aaron Y. Zelin, "Know Your Ansar al-Sharia," *Foreign Policy*, September 21, 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/21/know_your_ansar_al_sharia.

⁶ Joas Wagemakers, "Protecting Jihad: The Sharia Council of the Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad," *Middle East Policy*, Volume 18 Issue 2, Summer 2011, 148–162.

and also pushed for a robust use of *dawa* in the transitioning countries of North Africa that have had unprecedented freedom of expression.⁷

One of the most successful projects that ASL has undertaken is a vigorous anti-drug campaign in cooperation with the Rehab Clinic at the Psychiatric Hospital of Benghazi, the Ahli Club (soccer), Libya Company (Telecom and Technology), and the Technical Company. This suggests that there is buy-in at a town-level. It also highlights the goodwill and positive force some see in ASL for society. Additionally, ASL has been involved with cleaning roads, religious lectures, competitions for children, security patrols, and opening medical clinics and religious schools.

While *dawa* has been their main focus, what is more concerning is that they have also taken part in *hisba* (enjoining right and forbidding wrong; usually connotes vigilante activities) and *jihad* as well.⁸ With regard to *hisba*, al-Zahawi has admitted that his group has been involved in the demolition of Sufi shrines and places of worship.⁹ Further, ASL stormed the European School in Benghazi and took books on the human body because it saw it as contrary to Islam since it was "pornographic" in ASL's view.¹⁰ After being intimidated, teachers at the European school then blacked out the sections, which depicted the human body. There is also a video where members of Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte meted out a punishment by whipping some individuals tens of times.¹¹

Beyond threats to local stability and actors, the most well known act of *jihad* for ASL is when members of the group are believed to have been behind the attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi on September 11, 2012. There was no formal claim of responsibility, but the language used in the initial statement from ASL's spokesman Hani al-Mansuri suggests that some individuals in ASL were part of the attack: "Katibat Ansar al-Sharia [in Benghazi] as a military did not participate formally/officially and not by direct orders."¹² The ideological language used and posting of content unrelated to Libya on ASL's official Facebook suggest its affinity with al-Qaeda's worldview.

As ASL has grown it has been able to expand its scope from beyond Benghazi. Only until this past spring have there been signs of the movement becoming more national. On March 19, ASL's leaders had a meeting with the Ubari tribe, which is located in southern Libya.¹³ Two months later, ASL coordinated its first event outside of Benghazi in Tripoli as part of its anti-drug campaign lecture series.¹⁴ Most recently, on June 28, ASL announced the creation

⁷ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Tara Vassefi, "Perceptions of the "Arab Spring" Within the Salafi-Jihadi Movement," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Volume 35 Issue 12, 2012, 831-848.

⁸ This three-pronged strategy has also been utilized by Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia. For more on it see: Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia's Long Game: *Dawa*, *Hisba*, and *Jihad*," *International Centre for Counter-terrorism – The Hague*, ICCT Research Paper, May 2013.

⁹ Ahmed Maher, "Meeting Mohammad Ali al-Zahawi of Libyan Ansar al-Sharia," *BBC News*, September 18, 2012.

¹⁰ Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, "Statement #7: About the Curriculum of the European School in Benghazi," *al-Raya Media Foundation*, March 3, 2013.

¹¹ You can view the video here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=DGJSM2eXaaU

¹² Hani al-Mansuri, "Statement from Katibat Ansar al-Sharia," *al-Raya Media Foundation*, September 12, 2012.

¹³ Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, "Libyan Tribe of the South 'Ubari' is in Benghazi to get to know Ansar al-Sharia," *Raya Media Foundation*, March 19, 2013.

¹⁴ Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, "Campaign With Benghazi Against Drugs Joined by the Faduti Foundation in a Youth Conference in Tripoli," *Raya Media Foundation*, May 12, 2013.

of a new branch in Sirte.¹⁵ All of this points to the group expanding in capacity and influence contradicting some analysis that it was discredited and destroyed in the demonstrations in Benghazi in the aftermath of the US Consulate attack.

Muhajirin (Emigrants) in Syria

On the regional level, Libyans' involvement in Syria in terms of weapons, training, and foreign fighters is another aspect of potential regional destabilization. One of the biggest problems related to this issue is the complete passivity and agnostic reaction by Libya's leaders. For instance, in February 2012, the head of Libyan foreign affairs Ashour Bin Khayal told the *Financial Times*, "Actually we cannot stop anyone from going to Syria. People want to go and fight with the Syrians; no one is going prevent them. Officially we do not have this stance but we cannot control the desire of the people."¹⁶

One of the worst kept secrets locally, but only reported on within the past month is the large amount of weapons that Libyans have sent to Syria via Benghazi and Misrata through Lebanon and Turkey.¹⁷ In addition, similar to the Iraq jihad, Libya has become a transfer point for fighters in the Maghreb headed to Syria. News reports and jihadi sources suggest that some of these individuals have attended training camps in Misratah, Benghazi, the desert area near Hon, and the Green Mountains in the east prior to heading off for the fight in Syria.¹⁸

Even more worrisome is what happens with the Libyan foreign fighters when they come home after fighting in Syria. Many Libyan alumni of the 1980s anti-Soviet jihad came home to overthrow the Qadhafi regime and install an Islamic State. They of course failed, but we could see a repeat of this phenomenon and unlike in the 1990s, Libya is a weak state where much of its territory is not truly controlled by the central government.

In the past decade, Libyans have consistently been among the nationalities that have sent fighters to jihads abroad. For example, in October 2007, coalition forces in Iraq captured records in a raid near Sinjar along the Iraqi-Syrian border that contained a list of foreign fighters that joined al-Qaeda in Iraq between August 2006 and August 2007.¹⁹ Libyan fighters were estimated to constitute 18.8 percent of foreign fighters in Iraq, second only to Saudi Arabia's 41 percent.²⁰ As for the current conflict in Syria, based on a personal archive collected via primary and secondary sources, there have been more than 400 Libyans that

¹⁵ Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, "Founding Statement For Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte," *Raya Media Foundation*, June 28, 2013.

¹⁶ Borzou Daragahi, "Libya Can't Stop Fighters Joining Syria Rebels," *Financial Times*, February 12, 2012. Available at: <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/0976ef5e-5248-11e1-a155-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1lu5aY3Sr>; Also see this statement from the NTC: <https://www.facebook.com/NationalTransitionalCouncil.Libya/posts/433095960053399>

¹⁷ Jenan Moussa, "Sur Isalahah Libiyyah Thaqilah min dhiminaha Sam 7 bi-yad al-Muardhah al-Suriyyah," *Akhbar al-An*, June 16, 2013. Available at: <http://akhbar.alaan.tv/news/post/15136/syria-free-army-libya-heavy-weapons-sam-opposition-exclusive-jenan>

¹⁸ Bearer of the Sword, "Is a transnational rival network of Al Qaaidah emerging?," *Islamic Awakening Forum*, May 30, 2012. Available at: <http://forums.islamicawakening.com/f18/is-transnational-rival-network-al-qaaidah-emerging-59127/>

¹⁹ For more on this, see Brian Fishman and Joseph Felter, "Al-Qaida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records," Harmony Project, *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, January 2008, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/aqs-foreign-fighters-in-iraq.pdf>.

²⁰ Christopher Boucek, "Libyan State-Sponsored Terrorism: An Historical Perspective," *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor* 3, iss. 6, May 5, 2005, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=305](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=305).

have gone to fight in Syria.²¹ Among this group, not all are jihadis, but in the past year most have been affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra or other jihadi outfits. In a separate archive that collates jihadi martyrdom notices, more than 100 Libyans have died while fighting in Syria.²²

al-Qaeda and Libya

There are alleged claims of al-Qaeda Central directed presence in Libya. Most recently, in August 2012, the Library of Congress published an unclassified report about the growing presence of al-Qaeda cells in Libya.²³ al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri as well as Abu Yahya and Atiyatullah prior to both of their deaths planned to create a base for jihad in Libya. The report identified Abu Anas as the "builder of al-Qaeda's network in Libya" and referred to him as an intermediate between al-Qaeda senior leadership in Pakistan and the group's leaders on the ground in Libya. The report also maintains that al-Qaeda is using the name Ansar al-Sharia as a front, though, scant evidence has been provided at this juncture regarding this claim. Further, much of the report provides circumstantial evidence, assertions, and hearsay. Therefore, more information is needed regarding the nature of al-Qaeda Central's presence in Libya prior to assessing its true strength.

A better way one can learn and try and piece together the nature of AQ's presence and aims in Libya is via AQC and AQIM's media releases. Prior to the anti-Qadhafi uprising, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib had never released any statements focusing specifically on Libya.²⁴ Four statements issued following the outbreak of violence focused on warning Libyans not to trust NATO, appeals to Libyans to become involved in jihadist activities, and calls to create an Islamic state and establish sharia. But the group was vague on how to enact such change, and AQIM has not put forth specific objectives or an agenda for Libya.

AQIM has also made it a point of emphasizing, praising, and congratulating Libyans for overthrowing Muamar Qadhafi. The organization's statements repeatedly referred to Libyans as the "descendants" and "grandsons" of the anti-colonial leader Umar al-Mukhtar, attempting to link the organization to Libyan nationalist narratives.²⁵ Yet the group did not produce any Libyans to deliver these messages, unlike AQC, whose messages on Libya featured Abu Yahya al-Libi as well as Attiyatullah al-Libi, revealed for the first time in March 2011 to have been from the Libyan city of Misrata.²⁶

²¹ Aaron Zelin's personal archive titled "Foreign Fighters Flock to Syria," last updated May 27, 2013.

²² Aaron Zelin's personal archive titled "Jihadi Martyrdom Notices," last updated June 5, 2013.

²³ "al-Qaeda in Libya: A Profile."

²⁴ Aaron Y. Zelin, "Is al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib Gaining Influence in Libya?," *al-Wasat*, November 1, 2011. Available at: <http://thewasat.wordpress.com/2011/11/01/is-al-qaida-in-the-islamic-maghrib-gaining-influence-in-libya/>

²⁵ For AQIM's messages related to the Libyan uprising see: al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib, "Support and Backing for the [Libyan] Revolution of our Family, the Free, Descendants of Umar al-Mukhtar," *al-Andalus Media*, February 24, 2011; Abu Musab Abd al-Wadud (Abd al-Malik Drukdil), "Support for the Free, Descendants of Umar al-Mukhtar," *al-Andalus Media*, March 18, 2011; Abu Musab Abd al-Wadud (Abd al-Malik Drukdil), "Congratulations on the Victory of the Descendants of Umar al-Mukhtar," *al-Andalus Media*, October 2, 2011; Shaykh al-Hasan Rashid al-Bulaydi, "Open Letter to the Muslims in Libya," *al-Andalus Media*, October 27, 2011; Shaykh Abu Hayyan Asim: "Khutbah Id al Adha For The Year 1432 H," *al-Andalus Media*, November 18, 2011.

²⁶ Christopher Anzalone, "Al-Qaeda loses its 'renaissance man'," *Foreign Policy*, September 9, 2011. Available at: http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/09/09/al_qaeda_loses_its_renaissance_man; For the statements see: Abu Yahya al-Libi: "To Our People in Libya," *As-Sahab Media*, March 12, 2011; Atiyatullah Abu Abd ar-Rahman:

In March 2011, both Attiyatullah and Abu Yahya issued statements “congratulating” Libyans on shaking off Qadhafi’s rule, focusing on the primacy of instituting sharia as the sole source of legislation in the new Libya, and warning against the potential that the United States or Libyans with links to Qadhafi’s regime could usurp the rebels’ victory. Attiyatullah, however, called for reconciliation if possible with those who “made mistakes and wrong choices in the previous era.”

In December 2011, though, Abu Yahya’s message was more forthcoming on specific suggestions to Libyans, including recommendations for: the “formation of a board ... to oversee the realization of the revolution's demands”; a call for rebels not to give up their weapons; an invitation for Islamic scholars to form an independent committee that would have a direct role in formulating Libya’s constitution; and the severing of any ties the rebels had with Western governments. Indeed, this statement is one of the more substantive points made by an AQC senior leader regarding the Arab Spring. Despite passing mention from other leaders like Zawahiri, it seems that AQC left Libyan messaging to the group’s Libyans, though we do not know who within al-Qaeda actually formulated the group’s messaging on Libya.

The most recent message from AQC or AQIM on Libya came ten months ago when AQIM lauded the attack on the US Consulate in Benghazi and encouraging more such actions from the *mujahidin* in the region.²⁷ The lack of messaging highlights that although jihadis find Libya important it dwarfs compared with issues like Syria or Egypt. More troublesome is the current low profile that AQIM is keeping in southern Libya after elements of the organization were ejected from Northern Mali following the French invasion earlier this year.

Due to the lack of state control and secrecy of an organization like AQIM, it is difficult to know exactly the nature of where in southern Libya they are located and what they are specifically doing. That said, it is likely that they are using this new base to recruit, train, and plan attacks. Both attacks by Mukhtar Bilmukhtar’s Katibat al-Mulathamun, formerly of AQIM, but still loyal to AQC, are believed to have been planned or emanated originally from a Libyan safe haven.²⁸ At this point, there is no indication that groups like AQIM are planning attacks in the West beyond rhetorical points in messaging. That said, it is not inconceivable that they would in the future, though if the opportunity presented itself.

“Tribute To Our People in Libya,” *As-Sahab Media*, March 18, 2011; Abū Yahya al-Libi: “What Is Intended For Libya?,” *As-Sahab Media*, December 5, 2011.

²⁷ al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib, “Except the Beloved Oh Worshipers of the Cross,” *al-Andalus Media*, September 17, 2012.

²⁸ Paul Cruickshank and Tim Lister, “Algeria attack may have link to Libya camps,” *CNN*, January 23, 2013. Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/01/18/world/africa/algeria-attackers/>; “Niger attacks launched from southern Libya - Niger's president,” *Reuters*, May 25, 2013. Available at:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/25/niger-attacks-libya-idUSL5N0E60DD20130525>

Conclusion

The case of a threat emanating from Libya locally, regionally, and internationally is very real. It should not be overstated, though. Most jihadis are far more interested and focused on Syria and likely to be on Egypt in light of the coup d'état and subsequent arrests and violence by the military. Libya will still be a challenge, though. Militia actors and the periphery is stronger than the central government. The integration of militias into a legitimate police force and military has opened regional fissures among different cities in Libya due to the mistrust of regional outsiders by locals (which is a legacy of Qadhafi's divide and rule). Further, the blackmailing of the government by militias has eroded legitimacy in the new system, which hinders the ability to check emerging violent trends within the country. The United States therefore cannot rely on the government for help, it must work outside of the capital and get to know local actors since that is where the battles will occur. Containment with regional and Western European allies is likely the best one can hope for at this juncture. The situation is not ripe for a quick and easy fix or a short battle. This will be something that should continue to be monitored.