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## How al-Qaeda got to rule in Tripoli

By Pepe Escobar  
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His name is Abdelhakim Belhaj. Some in the Middle East might have, but few in the West and across the world would have heard of him.

Time to catch up. Because the story of how an al-Qaeda asset turned out to be the top Libyan military commander in still war-torn Tripoli is bound to shatter - once again - that wilderness of mirrors that is the "war on terror", as well as deeply compromising the carefully constructed propaganda of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) "humanitarian" intervention in Libya.

Muammar Gaddafi's fortress of Bab-al-Aziziyah was essentially invaded and conquered last week by Belhaj's men - who were at the forefront of a militia of Berbers from the mountains southwest of Tripoli. The militia is the so-called Tripoli Brigade, trained in secret for two months by US Special Forces. This turned out to be the rebels' most effective militia in six months of tribal/civil war.

Already last Tuesday, Belhaj was gloating on how the battle was won, with Gaddafi forces escaping "like rats" (note that's the same metaphor used by Gaddafi himself to designate the rebels).

Abdelhakim Belhaj, aka Abu Abdallah al-Sadek, is a Libyan jihadi. Born in May 1966, he honed his skills with the mujahideen in the 1980s anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan.

He's the founder of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and its de facto *emir* - with Khaled Chrif and Sami Saadi as his deputies. After the Taliban took power in Kabul in 1996, the LIFG kept two training camps in Afghanistan; one of them, 30 kilometers north of Kabul - run by Abu Yahya - was strictly for al-Qaeda-linked jihadis.

After 9/11, Belhaj moved to Pakistan and also to Iraq, where he befriended none other than ultra-nasty Abu Musab al-Zarqawi - all this before al-Qaeda in Iraq pledged its allegiance to Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri and turbo-charged its gruesome practices.

In Iraq, Libyans happened to be the largest foreign Sunni jihadi contingent, only losing to the Saudis. Moreover, Libyan jihadis have always been superstars in the top echelons of "historic" al-Qaeda - from Abu Faraj al-Libi (military commander until his arrest in 2005, now lingering as one of 16 high-value detainees in the US detention center at Guantanamo) to Abu al-Laith al-Libi (another military commander, killed in Pakistan in early 2008).

### **Time for an extraordinary rendition**

The LIFG had been on the US Central Intelligence Agency's radars since 9/11. In 2003, Belhaj was finally arrested in Malaysia - and then transferred, extraordinary rendition-style, to a secret Bangkok prison, and duly tortured.

In 2004, the Americans decided to send him as a gift to Libyan intelligence - until he was freed by the Gaddafi regime in March 2010, along with other 211 "terrorists", in a public relations coup advertised with great fanfare.

The orchestrator was no less than Saif Islam al-Gaddafi - the modernizing/London School of Economics face of the regime. LIFG's leaders - Belhaj and his deputies Chrif and Saadi - issued a 417-page confession dubbed "corrective studies" in which they declared the jihad against Gaddafi over (and illegal), before they were finally set free.

A fascinating account of the whole process can be seen in a report called "Combating Terrorism in Libya through Dialogue and Reintegration". [1] Note that the authors, Singapore-based terrorism "experts" who were wined and dined by the regime, express the "deepest appreciation to Saif al-Islam Gaddafi and the Gaddafi International Charity and Development Foundation for making this visit possible".

Crucially, still in 2007, then al-Qaeda's number two, Zawahiri, officially announced the merger between the LIFG and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Mahgreb (AQIM). So, for all practical purposes, since then, LIFG/AQIM have been one and the same - and Belhaj was/is its *emir*.

In 2007, LIFG was calling for a jihad against Gaddafi but also against the US and assorted Western "infidels".

Fast forward to last February when, a free man, Belhaj decided to go back into jihad mode and align his forces with the engineered uprising in Cyrenaica.

Every intelligence agency in the US, Europe and the Arab world knows where he's coming from. He's already made sure in Libya that himself and his militia will only settle for *sharia* law.

There's nothing "pro-democracy" about it - by any stretch of the imagination. And yet such an asset could not be dropped from NATO's war just because he was not very fond of "infidels".

The late July killing of rebel military commander General Abdel Fattah Younis - by the rebels themselves - seems to point to Belhaj or at least people very close to him.

It's essential to know that Younis - before he defected from the regime - had been in charge of Libya's special forces fiercely fighting the LIFG in Cyrenaica from 1990 to 1995.

The Transitional National Council (TNC), according to one of its members, Ali Tarhouni, has been spinning Younis was killed by a shady brigade known as Obaida ibn Jarrah (one of the Prophet Mohammed's companions). Yet the brigade now seems to have dissolved into thin air.

### **Shut up or I'll cut your head off**

Hardly by accident, all the top military rebel commanders are LIFG, from Belhaj in Tripoli to one Ismael as-Salabi in Benghazi and one Abdelhakim al-Assadi in Derna, not to mention a key asset, Ali Salabi, sitting at the core of the TNC. It was Salabi who negotiated with Saif al-Islam Gaddafi the "end" of LIFG's jihad, thus assuring the bright future of these born-again "freedom fighters".

It doesn't require a crystal ball to picture the consequences of LIFG/AQIM - having conquered military power and being among the war "winners" - not remotely interested in relinquishing control just to please NATO's whims.

Meanwhile, amid the fog of war, it's unclear whether Gaddafi is planning to trap the Tripoli brigade in urban warfare; or to force the bulk of rebel militias to enter the huge Warfallah tribal areas.

Gaddafi's wife belongs to the Warfallah, Libya's largest tribe, with up to 1 million people and 54 sub-tribes. The inside word in Brussels is that NATO expects Gaddafi to fight for months if not years; thus the Texas George W Bush-style bounty on his head and the desperate return to NATO's plan A, which was always to take him out.

Libya may now be facing the specter of a twin-headed guerrilla Hydra; Gaddafi forces against a weak TNC central government and NATO boots on the ground; and the LIFG/AQIM nebula in a jihad against NATO (if they are sidelined from power).

Gaddafi may be a dictatorial relic of the past, but you don't monopolize power for four decades for nothing, and without your intelligence services learning a thing or two.

From the beginning, Gaddafi said this was a foreign-backed/al-Qaeda operation; he was right

(although he forgot to say this was above all neo-Napoleonic French President Nicolas Sarkozy's war, but that's another story).

He also said this was a prelude for a foreign occupation whose target was to privatize and take over Libya's natural resources. He may - again – turn out to be right.

The Singapore "experts" who praised the Gaddafi regime's decision to free the LIFG's jihadis qualified it as "a necessary strategy to mitigate the threat posed to Libya".

Now, LIFG/AQIM is finally poised to exercise its options as an "indigenous political force".

Ten years after 9/11, it's hard not to imagine a certain decomposed skull in the bottom of the Arabian Sea boldly grinning to kingdom come.