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Jihadist Opportunities in Libya

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As George Friedman noted in his geopolitical weekly "Revolution and the Muslim World," one aspect of the recent wave of revolutions we have been carefully monitoring is the involvement of militant Islamists, and their reaction to these events.

Militant Islamists, and specifically the subset of militant Islamists we refer to as jihadists, have long sought to overthrow regimes in the Muslim world. With the sole exception of Afghanistan, they have failed, and even the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan was really more a matter of establishing a polity amid a power vacuum than the true overthrow of a coherent regime. The brief rule of the Supreme Islamic Courts Council in Somalia also occurred amid a similarly chaotic environment and a vacuum of authority.

However, even though jihadists have not been successful in overthrowing governments, they are still viewed as a threat by regimes in countries like Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. In response to this threat, these regimes have dealt quite harshly with the jihadists, and strong crackdowns combined with other programs have served to keep the jihadists largely in check.

As we watch the situation unfold in Libya, there are concerns that unlike Tunisia and Egypt, the uprising in Libya might result not only in a change of ruler but also in a change of regime and perhaps even a collapse of the state. In Egypt and Tunisia, strong military regimes were able to

ensure stability after the departure of a long-reigning president. By contrast, in Libya, longtime leader Moammar Gadhafi has deliberately kept his military and security forces fractured and weak and thereby dependent on him. Consequently, there may not be an institution to step in and replace Gadhafi should he fall. This means energy-rich Libya could spiral into chaos, the ideal environment for jihadists to flourish, as demonstrated by Somalia and Afghanistan.

Because of this, it seems an appropriate time to once again examine the dynamic of jihadism in Libya.

A Long History

Libyans have long participated in militant operations in places like Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya and Iraq. After leaving Afghanistan in the early 1990s, a sizable group of Libyan jihadists returned home and launched a militant campaign aimed at toppling Gadhafi, whom they considered an infidel. The group began calling itself the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) in 1995, and carried out a low-level insurgency that included assassination attempts against Gadhafi and attacks against military and police patrols.

Gadhafi responded with an iron fist, essentially imposing martial law in the Islamist militant strongholds of Darnah and Benghazi and the towns of Ras al-Helal and al-Qubbah in the Jabal al-Akhdar region. After a series of military crackdowns, Gadhafi gained the upper hand in dealing with his Islamist militant opponents, and the insurgency tapered off by the end of the 1990s. Many LIFG members fled the country in the face of the government crackdown and a number of them ended up finding refuge with groups like al Qaeda in places such as Afghanistan.

While the continued participation of Libyan men in fighting on far-flung battlefields was not expressly encouraged by the Libyan government, it was tacitly permitted. The Gadhafi regime, like other countries in the region, saw exporting jihadists as a way to rid itself of potential problems. Every jihadist who died overseas was one less the government had to worry about. This policy did not take into account the concept of "tactical Darwinism," which means that while the United States and its coalition partners will kill many fighters, those who survive are apt to be strong and cunning. The weak and incompetent have been weeded out, leaving a core of hardened, competent militants. These survivors have learned tactics for survival in the face of superior firepower and have learned to manufacture and effectively employ new types of highly effective improvised explosive devices (IEDs.(

In a Nov. 3, 2007, audio message, al Qaeda No. 2 Ayman al-Zawahiri reported that the LIFG had formally joined the al Qaeda network. This statement came as no real surprise, given that members of the group have long been close to al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden. Moreover, the core al Qaeda group has long had a large number of Libyan cadre in its senior ranks, including men such as Abu Yahya al-Libi, Anas al-Libi, Abu Faraj al-Libi (who reportedly is being held by U.S. forces at Guantanamo Bay) and Abu Laith al-Libi, who was killed in a January 2008 unmanned aerial vehicle strike in Pakistan.

The scope of Libyan participation in jihadist efforts in Iraq became readily apparent with the September 2007 seizure of a large batch of personnel files from an al Qaeda safe house in the Iraqi city of Sinjar. The Sinjar files were only a small cross-section of all the fighters traveling to Iraq to fight with the jihadists, but they did provide a very interesting snapshot. Of the 595 personnel files recovered, 112 of them were of Libyans. This number is smaller than the 244 Saudi citizens represented in the cache, but when one considers the overall size of the population of the two countries, the Libyan contingent represented a far larger percentage on a per capita basis. The Sinjar files suggested that a proportionally higher percentage of Libyans was engaged in the fighting in Iraq than their brethren from other countries in the region.

Another interesting difference was noted in the job-description section of the Sinjar files. Of those Libyan men who listed their intended occupation in Iraq, 85 percent of them listed it as suicide bomber and only 13 percent listed fighter. By way of comparison, only 50 percent of the Saudis listed their occupation as suicide bomber. This indicates that the Libyans tended to be more radical than their Saudi counterparts. Moroccans appeared to be the most radical, with more than 91 percent of them apparently desiring to become suicide bombers.

The Libyan government's security apparatus carefully monitored those Libyans who passed through the crucible of fighting on the battlefield in places like Iraq and Afghanistan and then returned to Libya. Tripoli took a carrot-and-stick approach to the group similar to that implemented by the Saudi regime. As a result, the LIFG and other jihadists were unable to pose a serious threat to the Gadhafi regime, and have remained very quiet in recent years. In fact, they were for the most part demobilized and rehabilitated.

Gadhafi's son, Seif al-Islam, oversaw the program to rehabilitate LIFG militants, which his personal charity managed. The regime's continued concern over the LIFG was clearly demonstrated early on in the unrest when it announced that it would continue the scheduled release from custody of LIFG fighters.

The Sinjar reports also reflected that more than 60 percent of the Libyan fighters had listed their home city as Darnah and almost 24 percent had come from Benghazi. These two cities are in Libya's east and happen to be places where some of the most intense anti-Gadhafi protests have occurred in recent days. Arms depots have been looted in both cities, and we have seen reports that at least some of those doing the looting appeared to have been organized Islamists.

A U.S. State Department cable drafted in Tripoli in June 2008 made available by WikiLeaks talked about this strain of radicalism in Libya's east. The cable, titled "Die Hard in Derna," was written several months after the release of the report on the Sinjar files. Derna is an alternative transliteration of Darnah, and "Die Hard" was a reference to the Bruce Willis character in the Die Hard movie series, who always proved hard for the villains to kill. The author of the cable, the U.S. Embassy's political and economic officer, noted that many of the Libyan fighters who returned from fighting in transnational jihad battlefields liked to settle in places like Darnah due to the relative weakness of the security apparatus there. The author of the cable also noted his belief that the presence of these older fighters was having an influence on the younger men of the region who were becoming radicalized, and the result was that Darnah had become "a wellspring

of foreign fighters in Iraq." He also noted that some 60-70 percent of the young men in the region were unemployed or underemployed.

Finally, the author opined that many of these men were viewing the fight in Iraq as a way to attack the United States, which they saw as supporting the Libyan regime in recent years. This is a concept jihadists refer to as attacking the far enemy and seems to indicate an acceptance of the transnational version of jihadist ideology — as does the travel of men to Iraq to fight and the apparent willingness of Libyans to serve as suicide bombers.

Trouble on the Horizon?

This deep streak of radicalism in eastern Libya brings us back to the beginning. While it seems unlikely at this point that the jihadists could somehow gain control of Libya, if Gadhafi falls and there is a period of chaos in Libya, these militants may find themselves with far more operating space inside the country than they have experienced in decades. If the regime does not fall and there is civil war between the eastern and western parts of the country, they could likewise find a great deal of operational space amid the chaos. Even if Gadhafi, or an entity that replaces him, is able to restore order, due to the opportunity the jihadists have had to loot military arms depots, they have suddenly found themselves more heavily armed than they have ever been inside their home country. And these heavily armed jihadists could pose a substantial threat of the kind that Libya has avoided in recent years.

Given this window of opportunity, the LIFG could decide to become operational again, especially if the regime they have made their deal with unexpectedly disappears. However, even should the LIFG decide to remain out of the jihad business as an organization, there is a distinct possibility that it could splinter and that the more radical individuals could cluster together to create a new group or groups that would seek to take advantage of this suddenly more permissive operational environment. Of course, there are also jihadists in Libya unaffiliated with LIFG and not bound by the organization's agreements with the regime.

The looting of the arms depots in Libya is also reminiscent of the looting witnessed in Iraq following the dissolution of the Iraqi army in the face of the U.S. invasion in 2003. That ordnance not only was used in thousands of armed assaults and indirect fire attacks with rockets and mortars, but many of the mortar and artillery rounds were used to fashion powerful IEDs. This concept of making and employing IEDs from military ordnance will not be foreign to the Libyans who have returned from Iraq (or Afghanistan, for that matter.(

This bodes ill for foreign interests in Libya, where they have not had the same security concerns in recent years that they have had in Algeria or Yemen. If the Libyans truly buy into the concept of targeting the far enemy that supports the state, it would not be out of the realm of possibility for them to begin to attack multinational oil companies, foreign diplomatic facilities and even foreign companies and hotels.

While Seif al-Islam, who certainly has political motives to hype such a threat, has mentioned this possibility, so have the governments of Egypt and Italy. Should Libya become chaotic and the jihadists become able to establish an operational base amid the chaos, Egypt and Italy will have

to be concerned about not only refugee problems but also the potential spillover of jihadists. Certainly, at the very least the weapons looted in Libya could easily be sold or given to jihadists in places like Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria, turning militancy in Libya into a larger regional problem. In a worst-case scenario, if Libya experiences a vacuum of power, it could become the next Iraq or Pakistan, a gathering place for jihadists from around the region and the world. The country did serve as such a base for a wide array of Marxist and rejectionist terrorists and militants in the 1970s and 1980s.

It will be very important to keep a focus on Libya in the coming days and weeks — not just to see what happens to the regime but also to look for indicators of the jihadists testing their wings.