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The Telegraph

Libyan rebel commander admits his fighters have al-Qaeda links

By Praveen Swami

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In an interview with the Italian newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*, Mr al-Hasidi admitted that he had recruited "around 25" men from the Derna area in eastern Libya to fight against coalition troops in Iraq. Some of them, he said, are "today are on the front lines in Adjabiya".

Mr al-Hasidi insisted his fighters "are patriots and good Muslims, not terrorists," but added that the "members of al-Qaeda are also good Muslims and are fighting against the invader".

His revelations came even as Idriss Deby Itno, Chad's president, said al-Qaeda had managed to pillage military arsenals in the Libyan rebel zone and acquired arms, "including surface-to-air missiles, which were then smuggled into their sanctuaries".

Mr al-Hasidi admitted he had earlier fought against "the foreign invasion" in Afghanistan, before being "captured in 2002 in Peshwar, in Pakistan". He was later handed over to the US, and then held in Libya before being released in 2008.

US and British government sources said Mr al-Hasidi was a member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, or LIFG, which killed dozens of Libyan troops in guerrilla

Even though the LIFG is not part of the al-Qaeda organisation, the United States military's West Point academy has said the two share an "increasingly co-operative relationship". In 2007, documents captured by allied forces from the town of Sinjar, showed LIFG emmbers made up the second-largest cohort of foreign fighters in Iraq, after Saudi Arabia.

Earlier this month, al-Qaeda issued a call for supporters to back the Libyan rebellion, which it said would lead to the imposition of "the stage of Islam" in the country.

British Islamists have also backed the rebellion, with the former head of the banned al-Muhajiroun proclaiming that the call for "Islam, the Shariah and jihad from Libya" had "shaken the enemies of Islam and the Muslims more than the tsunami that Allah sent against their friends, the Japanese".