

# The Manchester Bombing as Blowback:

## The latest evidence

*A Briefing by Mark Curtis and Nafeez Ahmed*

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(This briefing will be updated as more evidence emerges. Sources are overwhelmingly from mainstream media, except where clearly stated).

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*The evidence suggests that the barbaric Manchester bombing, which killed 22 innocent people on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, is a case of blowback on British citizens arising at least partly from the overt and covert actions of British governments. The British state therefore has a serious case to answer. We focus primarily here on UK policies towards Libya but also touch on some of those related to Iraq and Syria.*

## **Summary**

In summary, the evidence so far shows that there are six inter-related aspects of blowback:

1. Salman Abedi and his father were members of a Libyan dissident group - the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) - covertly supported by the UK to assassinate Qadafi in 1996. At this time, the LIFG was an affiliate of Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda and LIFG leaders had various connections to this terror network.
2. Members of the LIFG were facilitated by the British 'security services' to travel to Libya to fight Qadafi in 2011. Both Salman Abedi and his father, Ramadan, were among those who travelled to fight at this time (although there is no evidence that their travel was personally facilitated or encouraged by the security services).
3. A large number of LIFG fighters in Libya in 2011 had earlier fought alongside the Islamic State of Iraq - the al-Qaeda entity which later established a presence in Syria and became the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). These fighters were among those recruited into the British-backed anti-Qadafi rebellion.
4. UK covert action in Libya in 2011 included approval of and support to Qatar's arming and backing of opposition forces, which included support to hardline Islamist groups; this fuelled jihadism in Libya.
5. One of the groups armed/supported by Qatar in 2011 was the February 17th Martyrs Brigade which, some reports suggest, was the organisation which Ramadan Abedi joined in 2011 to fight Qadafi.
6. Qatar's arms supplies to Libya in 2011 also found their way to Islamist fighters in Syria, including groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and ISIS.

## **Conclusions**

The evidence points to the LIFG being seen by the UK as a proxy militia to promote its foreign policy objectives. Whitehall also saw Qatar as a proxy to provide boots on the ground in Libya in 2011, even as it empowered hardline Islamist groups.

Both David Cameron, then Prime Minister, and Theresa May - who was Home Secretary in 2011 when Libyan radicals were encouraged to fight Qadafi - clearly have serious questions to answer. We believe an independent public enquiry is urgently needed.

The evidence suggests that British actions in three different theatres - Libya, Iraq and Syria - cannot be viewed in isolation:

- In Libya, US and UK led intervention destroyed the functioning state and created a vacuum allowing hardline Islamist fighters to consolidate their foothold in the country. This paved the way for the empowerment of ISIS. The direct line between Libyan and Syrian Islamist rebels fuelled jihadism in both countries.
- In Iraq, US and UK led intervention also destroyed the existing state infrastructure and fuelled an Islamist insurgency which incubated al-Qaeda in Iraq and culminated in the emergence of ISIS.
- In Syria, US and UK covert action, again in partnership with Gulf states such as Qatar, and Turkey, has had the effect of augmenting the role of al-Qaeda in the rebel movement.

This combination of Anglo-American policies across the region has contributed to further instability and the rise of violent jihadism. In fact, an even stronger conclusion may be warranted based on the evidence of the extent of UK covert and overt action in the region in alliance with states consistently supplying arms to terrorist groups: that agencies of the British government itself have, in some senses, become part of the broader 'terrorist network' with which the British public is now confronted.

While a number of factors operate to contribute to an individual's radicalisation, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that one of these contributory factors is British direct and covert action in Iraq, Libya and Syria. Without these actions – by Britain and its close allies - it is conceivable that Abedi might well not have had the opportunity to become radicalised in the way he did.

## 1. The Abedis' connection to the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)

The Manchester bomber, Salman Abedi, then aged 16, is reported to have fought against the Qadafi regime with his father Ramadan in the uprising of 2011.<sup>1</sup> The group that Salman Abedi joined, fighting alongside his father, was reportedly the LIFG.<sup>2</sup> Ramadan Abedi is reported as having been a prominent member of the LIFG, which he joined in 1994.<sup>3</sup>

The LIFG was until 2009 an affiliate of al-Qaeda. Abdel Bari Atwan, editor-in-chief of the Arabic daily, Al-Quds Al-Arabi, reports that the LIFG had “long-standing ties” with al-Qaeda since the Afghan jihad, which were sustained through the role of Libyans and LIFG personnel in key al-Qaeda operations:

“Abu Anas Al-Libi was one the masterminds behind the 1998 US Embassy bombings; Abu Hafs Al-Libi was Al-Zarqawi’s lieutenant until his death in 2004; and Ibn Sheikh Al-Libi commanded Al-Khaldan, and Al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan.”<sup>4</sup>

Other reports suggest that Ramadan fought with the February 17th Martyrs Brigade.<sup>5</sup> The BBC notes that many of Qadafi’s opponents living in the UK and connected to the LIFG joined the February 17th Martyrs Brigade, one of the key fighting units in the 2011 war. It reported that Salman Abedi’s father was part of the group who left the UK for one last battle against Gaddafi.<sup>6</sup> This group was armed and supported by Qatar in 2011, as part of an overall policy approved by the UK, as we document later.

### **Box 1: Ramadan Abedi**

Abedi's father Ramadan was a member of Libya’s secret service under Qadafi but fled the regime with his mother in 1991.<sup>7</sup> They went first to Saudi Arabia in 1991 and in 1992 moved to London after applying for asylum.<sup>8</sup> Ramadan Abedi Ramadan was part of the broad network of opponents in the UK who supported Islamist anti-Qadafi aims.<sup>9</sup> After Qadafi was overthrown, the Abedi family moved to Manchester but Ramadan largely settled back in Libya, with the rest of the family coming and going between Tripoli and Manchester.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. British covert support to the LIFG, 1996

Leaders in the LIFG had fought together in Afghanistan in the early 1990s, helping the Afghan mujahidin to overthrow the Soviet-backed government in Kabul.<sup>11</sup> The British government and CIA then covertly supported the mujahidin.<sup>12</sup>

In the mid to late 1990s, the LIFG was most active in the eastern province of Cyrenaica, was involved in violent clashes with the Benghazi police, and attempted to assassinate Qadafi. In 1996, there is evidence, now widely-known, that MI6 funded an operation to assassinate Qadafi using the LIFG. (See Box 2) The plot failed but the LIFG continued its violence in eastern Libya and sent fighters to at least two military training camps in Sudan in 1996, in which al-Qaeda was also present, thus helping the LIFG make contacts with al-Qaeda.<sup>13</sup>

When Qadafi clamped down on the LIFG following the assassination attempt, the UK gave refuge to some of its members and dozens were allowed to settle in Britain.<sup>14</sup>

By the end of the 1990s, LIFG activity had slowed drastically and many LIFG members relocated to join al-Qaeda. In 2001, the US Treasury Department listed LIFG as a foreign terrorist organisation linked to al-Qaeda. In 2002, LIFG's al-Qaeda ties came under increasing scrutiny when Anas al-Libi, a senior LIFG commander and companion of Osama bin Laden, was detained by US forces for the 1998 bombings of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. In May 2003, the LIFG reportedly worked with the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GCIM) to plan five synchronised suicide bombings that killed 45 people in Casablanca, Morocco.<sup>15</sup>

Since then, the LIFG's links to al-Qaeda have been complicated, with the group disavowing a relationship with the terror network in around 2009 and purportedly renouncing terrorism against civilians through the release of a new moral code for jihad. However, despite the fanfare over this renunciation of jihadist ideology, questions have been raised as to whether the contents of the code really go far enough, and the extent to which the disassociation with al-Qaeda ideology and tactics was made under government pressure.<sup>16</sup>

### **Box 2: The plot to assassinate Qadafi, 1996<sup>17</sup>**

According to former MI5 officer and whistleblower David Shayler, the episode began when a Libyan military intelligence officer approached MI6 with a plan to overthrow Qadafi. The Libyan, codenamed 'Tunworth', proposed establishing links with the LIFG. Shayler asserts that he was told by an MI6 officer, David Watson, that in Christmas 1995 he, Watson, had supplied Tunworth with \$40,000 to buy weapons to carry out the assassination plot and that similar sums were handed over at two further meetings. A secret MI6 cable dated December 1995 – leaked in 2000 and published on the internet - revealed MI6's knowledge of an attempt to overthrow Qadafi in a coup led by five Libyan colonels scheduled for February 1996. The cable also noted that one Libyan officer and twenty military personnel were being trained in the desert for their

role in the attack, and that “the plotters had already distributed 250 Webley pistols and 500 heavy machine guns among their sympathizers”, who were said to number 1,275 people, including students, military personnel and teachers.

The plot went ahead in February 1996 in Sirte, Qadafi’s home city, but a bomb was detonated under the wrong car. Six innocent bystanders were killed, and Qadafi escaped unscathed. Annie Machon, Shayler’s partner and a former MI5 officer, writes that, by the time MI6 paid over the money to Tunworth, Osama Bin Laden’s organization was already known to be responsible for the 1993 World Trade Centre bombing, and MI5 had set up G9C, “a section dedicated to the task of defeating Bin Laden and his affiliates”.

US intelligence sources later told the *Mail on Sunday* newspaper that MI6 had indeed been behind the assassination plot and had turned to the LIFG’s leader, Abu Abdullah Sadiq, who was living in London. The head of the assassination team was reported as being the Libya-based Abdal Muhaymeen, a veteran of the Afghan resistance. A spattering of other media investigations confirmed the plot while a BBC film documentary broadcast in August 1998 was told that the Conservative government ministers then in charge of MI6 gave no authorisation for the operation and that it was solely the work of MI6 officers. This contradicted the earlier claim by then Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, that MI6 involvement in the plot was “pure fantasy”. Equally, the government’s denial of knowledge of the plot was decisively contradicted by the leaked cable, which showed that civil servants in the Permanent Secretary’s Department, GCHQ, MI5 and the MoD were all aware of the assassination attempt some two months before it was carried out. It is inconceivable that none of them would have informed their ministers.

### 3. British covert action in Libya, 2011

*LIFG members played a key role in the opposition forces that toppled Qaddafi in 2011. But Britain also facilitated the flow of LIFG dissidents from the UK to fight Qaddafi. It also approved massive arms supplies to the opposition to Qaddafi by Qatar, much of which went to hardline Islamist groups.*

#### 3.1 Facilitating travel to fight in Libya

Middle East Eye has reported that the British government operated an 'open door' policy that allowed Libyan exiles and British-Libyan citizens to join the 2011 uprising that toppled Muammar Qaddafi even though some had been subject to counter-terrorism control orders. Several former rebel fighters now back in the UK told Middle East Eye that they had been able to travel to Libya with 'no questions asked'. These dissidents were then members of the LIFG and most were from Manchester. One said that, as he was travelling back to Libya in May 2011, he was approached by two counter-terrorism police officers in the departure lounge who told him that if he was going to fight he would be committing a crime. But after providing them with the name and phone number of an MI5 officer he had spoken to previously, and following a quick phone call to him, he was waved through. As he waited to board the plane, he said the same MI5 officer called him to tell him that he had "sorted it out".<sup>18</sup>

The Daily Mail reported that:

"when they returned to the UK, having spent months alongside groups thought by British intelligence to have links with Al-Qaeda, rebels were said to have been allowed back into the country without hesitation."<sup>19</sup>

The Daily Mail also reported:

"Libyan officials have backed up the claims, saying the British government were 'fully aware' of young men being sent to fight, turning the North African country into an 'exporter of terror'".<sup>20</sup>

Peter Osborne, also writing in the Mail, has written that Libyan dissidents were "undoubtedly encouraged" to travel to Libya to oust Qaddafi and that this was with the "encouragement of MI6" which released terror suspects from control orders.<sup>21</sup>

Our understanding, however, is that control orders on the Libyan dissidents were actually rescinded in 2009, under the Gordon Brown government, and not in 2011. (See Box 3). Therefore, they were not released from these orders just in time to fight Qaddafi. However, we understand their passports were returned early in 2011, enabling them to travel to Libya.

<b>Box 3: The LIFG and Britain</b>
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The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group was banned in Britain in 2005 after Blair's 'deal in the desert' with Qaddafi in 2004, when Blair agreed to crack down on Libyan dissidents in the UK.<sup>22</sup> But in 2009, Qaddafi struck a peace deal with the LIFG following which the Brown government released the LIFG dissident from UK control orders. At the same time, the leaders of the LIFG, most of whom were in jail in Libya, distanced themselves from al-Qaeda and condemned terrorist attacks on civilians.<sup>23</sup> As we show below, however, the LIFG retained connections with al-Qaeda despite formally distancing itself from the group.

### 3.2 UK covert action in Libya

*The opposition forces working to overthrow Qaddafi in 2011, which were backed by the UK and its coalition, included Islamist elements, former members of the LIFG and suspected al-Qaeda militants previously imprisoned by the US (see Box 4).*

Abdelhakim Belhaj, was LIFG's emir from 1995 to 2010. In 1998, when LIFG members fled to Afghanistan to help the Taliban, Belhaj developed close relationships with Taliban chief Mullah Omar and al-Qaeda leaders.<sup>24</sup> He also wrote a glowing letter of support to the al-Qaeda mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Centre bombing.<sup>25</sup> Yet Belhaj would go on to become a military commander for the NATO-backed National Transition Council in Tripoli to bring down Qaddafi in 2011.

During the 2011 war, the Gulf state of Qatar armed the Libyan opposition and in the process supported various hardline Islamist groups. Britain specifically backed the Qatari role in arming the opposition and worked closely with Qatar, supporting its provision of arms and support to fighters on the ground. Indeed, there is evidence that the Qatari role in Libya was specifically proposed by Britain.<sup>26</sup> Qatari arms went to Islamist groups such as the 17 February Martyrs Brigade, a militia comprised in part by Islamist fighters who had fought against Qaddafi. Qatari support also went to Rafallah al-Sehati, a group whose extremists later broke away to form Ansar al-Shariah, the militant group that played a role in the death of the American ambassador, Christopher Stevens (see Box 5).

The weapons and money from Qatar strengthened militant groups in Libya, allowing them to become a destabilising force since the fall of the Qaddafi regime.

#### **Box 4: Islamists in the Libyan Opposition<sup>27</sup>**

Britain provided a range of support to the rebel Libyan leadership, which was grouped in the National Transitional Council (NTC), an initially 33-member self-selected body of mainly former Qaddafi ministers and other opposition forces, formed in Benghazi in February 2011 to provide an alternative government. The NTC's military forces were led by various former Libyan army officers, but Islamist elements with links to al-Qaeda were also prominent. Two former mujahidin who had fought in Afghanistan led the military campaign against Qaddafi's forces in Darnah, to the east of Benghazi, for example. Abdel Hakim al-Hasidi, an influential Islamist preacher who spent five years at a jihadist training

camp in eastern Afghanistan, oversaw the recruitment, training and deployment in the conflict of around 300 rebel fighters from Darnah. Both al-Hasidi and his field commander on the front lines, Salah al-Barrani, were former members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG).

It was also reported that Sufyan Ben Qumu, a Libyan army veteran who worked for Osama bin Laden's holding company in Sudan and later for an al-Qaeda-linked charity in Afghanistan, ran the training of many of Darnah's rebel recruits. Qumu spent six years at Guantanamo Bay before he was turned over to Libyan custody in 2007; he was released, along with al-Hasidi, from a Libyan prison in 2008 as part of Libya's reconciliation with the LIFG.<sup>28</sup> Al-Hasidi, who had fought against the US in Afghanistan in 2001, had been arrested in Pakistan in 2002 and turned over to the US, imprisoned probably at the US base at Bagram, Afghanistan, and then mysteriously released. The US Deputy Secretary of State, James Steinberg, told Congressmen he would speak of al-Hasidi's career only in a closed session.<sup>29</sup>

Other commentators recognised the Islamist nature of some of the rebels. Noman Benotman, a former member of the LIFG who had fought the Soviets in Afghanistan, estimated that there were 1,000 jihadists fighting in Libya.<sup>30</sup> Sir Richard Dearlove observed that the rebel stronghold of Benghazi was "rather fundamentalist in character" and Admiral James Stavridis, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, said that US intelligence had picked up "flickers" of terrorist activity among the rebel groups; this was described by senior British government figures as "very alarming".<sup>31</sup> Shadow foreign secretary Douglas Alexander said in parliament that since there was evidence of the presence of al-Qaeda-linked forces among the rebels, Britain should "proceed with very real caution" in arming them. In response, Foreign Secretary William Hague downplayed the concern, saying that

"Of course we want to know about any links with al-Qaeda, as we do about links with any organisations anywhere in the world, but given what we have seen of the interim transitional national council in Libya, I think it would be right to put the emphasis on the positive side".<sup>32</sup>

In mid-March 2011, when the Qaddafi regime was still clinging to power in Tripoli, Libyan authorities paraded in front of the world's media a British citizen captured in Libya and branded an Islamic terrorist. Salah Mohammed Ali Aboaoba said he was a member of the LIFG and had moved from Yemen to Britain in 2005, where he stayed until 2010, having been granted asylum, living with his family in Manchester and raising funds for the LIFG.<sup>33</sup>

#### **Box 5: Qatar's role and British support**

In April 2011, The Telegraph reported that "Britain will urge Arab states to train and lead Libya's rebels, with former British military personnel in line to play a central role in the escalation of the international intervention". The key role was to be played by Qatar and the United Arab Emirates who "will be asked to put

military trainers into Libya to transform the disparate rebels into a coherent fighting force". The Telegraph noted that the British government was proposing using "former British personnel could be used as trainers and 'force multipliers'". And that: "Former members of the Special Air Service, Special Boat Service and other elite British regiments are frequently employed by private military companies and Middle Eastern regimes as 'advisers' for their own armed forces". The Telegraph noted that Britain was already supplying the rebels with "non-lethal" communications equipment to help them co-ordinate their units.<sup>34</sup>

The Times reported in June 2011 that "Britain and France are using Qatar to bankroll the Libyan rebels". The reason was that NATO airstrikes failed to dislodge the Libyan leader while the rebels lack the firepower and military discipline to take advantage on the ground. The Times noted that "Britain and France are relying on Doha in a bid to tip the balance", according to a senior western diplomat, who was quoted as saying: "We need to reinforce military pressure. It has to bite on the ground. The Qataris are doing what needs to be done." A security source in the Gulf also told The Times that British and French officials discussed selling arms to Qatar with a view to Doha passing them on to Benghazi.<sup>35</sup>

UK covert forces were deployed to Libya to support the rebels. Britain sent military advice into eastern Libya to make contact with opposition leaders.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, it was reported that "dozens" of British special forces soldiers and officers from MI-6 were working inside Libya by March 2011.<sup>37</sup>

General David Richards, then Chief of the Defence Staff, recently told a Parliamentary enquiry that Britain "had a few people embedded" with the rebel forces, saying that they were "in the rear areas" and "would go forward and back".<sup>38</sup> In March 2011, it was reported that a suspected British intelligence and special forces unit, had been caught near Benghazi. A senior member of Benghazi's revolutionary council said: "They were carrying espionage equipment, reconnaissance equipment, multiple passports and weapons".<sup>39</sup>

British special forces working alongside others, including Qatar in the final advance on the Gadhafi regime. British forces assisted rebel units by "helping them get better organised to conduct operations" and to "improve their tactics", a NATO official said.<sup>40</sup>

Qatar was a major financial backer of the Libyan rebels, providing them with a massive \$400 million worth of support, much of which was provided to the Islamist radicals. Moreover, Qatar also sent hundreds of troops to fight on the frontline and to provide infantry training to Libyan fighters in the western Nafusa mountains and in eastern Libya.<sup>41</sup> It secretly supplied anti-tank weapons to the Libyan rebels.<sup>42</sup>

Much of Qatar's support went to the so-called 17 February Martyrs Brigade, one of the most influential rebel formations led by Abdel-Hakim Belhaj, a leading member of the LIFG who became the rebel military commander in Tripoli.<sup>43</sup> The

group had been hired to protect the US consulate in Benghazi, but largely failed to show up on the evening of the attacks on the embassy in 2012.<sup>44</sup> Another group supported by Qatar was an Islamist militia in Benghazi known as Rafallah al-Sehati that had relatively Western-friendly leaders but extremists in its ranks. The extremists later broke away to form Ansar al-Shariah, the militant group that played a role in the death of the American ambassador, J. Christopher Stevens.<sup>45</sup>

Britain is reported to have approved of Qatari arms supplies to the opposition.<sup>46</sup> The Obama administration also secretly gave its blessing to arms shipments to Libyan rebels from Qatar.<sup>47</sup> The New York Times reported:

“Within weeks of endorsing Qatar’s plan to send weapons there in spring 2011, the White House began receiving reports that they were going to Islamic militant groups”.

They were “more antidemocratic, more hardline, closer to an extreme version of Islam” than the main rebel alliance in Libya, said a former Defense Department official.<sup>48</sup> Qatar’s chief-of-staff, Major-General Hamad bin Ali al-Atiya, later said: “We acted as the link between the rebels and NATO forces”.<sup>49</sup> Qatar also played a key role alongside Britain in the ‘Libya contact group’ that coordinated policy against the Qaddafi regime; the first meeting of the group, in April 2011, for example, was convened by Qatar and co-chaired by Britain in Doha.<sup>50</sup>

As the New York Times reported: “The weapons and money from Qatar strengthened militant groups in Libya, allowing them to become a destabilising force since the fall of the Qaddafi government”.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, some of Qatar’s arms were subsequently moved from Libya to militants in Syria and Mali.<sup>52</sup>

## **4. From Libya to Iraq to Syria: LIFG's links to ISIS and the fuelling of the jihad**

NATO's intervention in Libya effectively created the conditions by which the country became a safe haven for jihadists sympathetic to al-Qaeda and ISIS, despite doctrinal disagreements. Far from the LIFG having been simply "deradicalised" as it had claimed in 2009, the documentary and public record evidence suggests that significant numbers of LIFG members remained sympathetic to the violent Islamist cause.

A large number of LIFG fighters in Libya in 2011 had earlier fought alongside the Islamic State of Iraq - the al-Qaeda entity which later established a presence in Syria and became the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS (and later the Islamic State). *They were then recruited into the British-backed anti-Qaddafi rebellion.*

### **4.1 Abedi's connection to ISIS**

Salman Abedi's connections to the LIFG may have facilitated his military training and Islamist indoctrination. Yet they also appear to have provided him with access to an environment in postwar Libya which had become fertile ground for the promulgation of violent jihadist ideology – conditions partly created by the British-backed intervention.

That Abedi was influenced by ISIS ideology is suggested by reports that he had links to an ISIS cell operating in south Manchester, in particular an ISIS recruiter called Raphael Hostey who "sponsored hundreds of terror recruits." Abedi reportedly had a "significant" connection to Hostey, who is believed to have been killed in a drone strike in Syria.<sup>53</sup>

Salman Abedi was also reportedly connected to another ISIS recruiter, Abdalraouf Abdallah, a Libyan refugee who was jailed for terror offences in Britain for trying to recruit other Manchester-based extremists to join ISIS. Associates of the two families said that Abedi's father Ramadan cared for Abdalraouf in Libya after he was shot and paralysed in 2012. Prosecutors described Abdallah as being "at the centre of a jihadist network facilitating foreign fighters". Sources said that Salman Abedi and Abdallah were "friends".<sup>54</sup>

### **4.2 The LIFG's links to ISIS**

The British-backed intervention in Libya paved the way for violent Islamist groups to expand and consolidate their presence in the country. In particular, Britain's alliance with the LIFG appears to have played a direct role in facilitating the influx into Libya of foreign fighters sympathetic to al-Qaeda and ISIS (see Box 6).

<b>Box 6: The LIFG's links to al-Qaeda and ISIS in Iraq before 2011</b>
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According to insurgent personnel records captured by US forces in Sinjar, Iraq, in 2006, LIFG had established early connections during the war in Iraq with the precursor organisation to ISIS. The US Army's Combating Terrorism Centre (CTC) at West Point found in 2007 that LIFG had achieved a "unification" with al-Qaeda evident in "its apparent decision to prioritise providing logistical support to the Islamic State of Iraq." Over 100 Libyans had joined al-Qaeda in Iraq or ISIS between 2006 and 2007.<sup>55</sup> In 2011, the CTC's analysis of the 'Sinjar records' confirmed "a real surge in the number" of Libyan foreign fighters joining al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2007.<sup>56</sup>

Also in 2011, Abdel-Hakim al-Hasidi, a Libyan rebel leader who headed up security under the NATO-backed National Transitional Council in the city of Derna, confirmed that Libyans who had fought with al-Qaeda against US forces in Iraq had returned to topple Qaddafi. He told an Italian daily how he had personally recruited 25 Libyans from Derna to fight coalition troops in Iraq. Some of them, he said, are "today are on the front lines in Adjabiya", a coastal city in north-central Libya which saw some of the heaviest fighting against Qaddafi's forces. Al-Hasidi insisted that 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".<sup>57</sup>

A June 2008 State Department cable from the US embassy in Tripoli corroborated the 'Sinjar records' and further confirmed a direct connection between LIFG fighters returning to Libya from the jihad with al-Qaeda in Iraq against US forces, and noted their aspiration to use their training to eventually topple Qaddafi. The document, written by Ambassador Christopher Stevens – who was killed in the 2012 attack on the US consulate in Benghazi – cites evidence that eastern Libyans were "sending young Libyans to fight in Iraq." Combating US forces "represented a way for frustrated young radicals to strike a blow against both Qadhafi and against his perceived American backers."<sup>58</sup>

The document notes that this mindset had a long history:

"A number of Libyans who had fought and in some cases undergone 'religious and ideological training' in Afghanistan, Lebanon and the West Bank in the late 1970's and early 1980's had returned to eastern Libya... in the mid to late 1980's."

The same individuals were, the cable assesses, pushing forward:

"a deliberate, coordinated campaign to propagate more conservative iterations of Islam, in part to prepare the ground for the eventual overthrow by the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) of Muammar Qadhafi's regime, which is 'hated' by conservative Islamists."<sup>59</sup>

### 4.3 Arms to the jihad in Syria

Some of Qatar's arms supplies to Islamists in Libya in 2011 were subsequently moved from Libya to militants in Syria, fuelling the jihadist cause there (See Box 7).<sup>60</sup>

#### **Box 7: Arming the Syrian jihad**

Document releases under FOIA from the Pentagon and Department of State show that the CIA was well aware of how weapons from anti-Qadafi rebels in Benghazi were covertly shipped to Islamist rebels in Syria by the Gulf states and Turkey.<sup>61</sup>

A September 2012 Pentagon Defence Intelligence Agency document confirmed that the Gulf states and Turkey, with Western support, were supporting Syrian rebel groups consisting of "the Salafist, the Muslim Brotherhood, and AQI [al-Qaeda in Iraq]." Al-Qaeda in Iraq's role among "the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria" was noted in the context of anticipating that the support would lead to the creation of a "Salafist Principality" in eastern Syria. The document even predicted the possibility that al-Qaeda in Iraq's main vehicle, ISI, "could also declare an Islamic State through its union with other terrorist organisations in Iraq and Syria."<sup>62</sup>

The same powers that were involved in supplying Libya's rebels, particularly Qatar, were active in Syria. Around the time that the DIA report circulated in the intelligence community, classified US intelligence assessments made available to President Obama and senior policymakers showed that most Saudi and Qatari arms were going to "hard-line Islamic jihadists, and not the more secular opposition groups".<sup>63</sup>

In 2014, a senior Qatari official revealed that Qatar and Saudi Arabia had for years provided economic and military assistance primarily to both al-Qaeda's Syrian arm, Jabhat al-Nusra, and to ISIS.<sup>64</sup>

A secret memo written for then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in August 2014 (which appeared on the WikiLeaks website in 2016) noted that the Saudi and Qatari governments "are providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL [ISIS] and other radical Sunni groups in the region".<sup>65</sup>

Saudi Arabia's neighbour Qatar, the world's only other predominantly Wahhabi state with whom Theresa May's government has recently signed large commercial deals, may have been the biggest funder of the Syrian rebels, with some estimates suggesting the amount may be as much as \$3 billion.<sup>66</sup>

While this does not justify labelling all the Syrian rebels as jihadists, it explains why the more secular, democratic forces among the rebels have often been supplanted by hardline Islamist forces.

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