

# Mounting evidence of CIA ties to Libyan rebels

Patrick Martin  
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Numerous press reports over the weekend add to the evidence that the Libyan rebels fighting the regime of Muammar Gaddafi are under the direction of American intelligence agencies. Despite the repeated claims by Obama administration officials that the rebels are a largely unknown quantity, it is becoming increasingly clear that key military leaders of the anti-Gaddafi campaign are well known to the US government and have longstanding relations with the CIA.

For better than two weeks there had been a virtual ban in the US media on reporting the name of Khalifa Haftar, the long-time CIA collaborator who was appointed chief rebel commander March 17, on the eve of the US-NATO bombing campaign against Libya. Only the regional McClatchy Newspapers chain reported Haftar's appointment, and ABC News ran a brief interview with him on March 27. Otherwise, silence prevailed.

This de facto censorship abruptly ended April 1, when a right-wing US think tank, the Jamestown Foundation, published a lengthy study of Haftar's background and record, which was cited extensively by Reuters news service, and then more widely in the US and British media.

The Jamestown Foundation report declared: "Today as Colonel Haftar finally returns to the battlefields of North Africa with the objective of toppling Gaddafi, his former co-conspirator from Libya's 1969 coup, he may stand as the best liaison for the United States and allied NATO forces in dealing with Libya's unruly rebels."

The Jamestown study noted Haftar's role in organizing the Libyan National Army (LNA), which he founded "on June 21, 1988 with strong backing from the Central Intelligence Agency," and cites a 1991 interview with him "conducted in an LNA camp in rural Virginia." Not only did the CIA sponsor and fund the LNA, it engineered the entry of LNA officers and men into the United States where they established a training camp.

Reuters added, using a variant spelling of the name, that it has "repeatedly asked for an interview with Hefta but he could not immediately be contacted." The news service

added, "The CIA declined to comment" on its relationship to the former Libyan military leader.

Other references to Haftar's role appeared in the online blog of the *New Yorker* magazine, in *Africa Confidential*, on National Public Radio, the British daily *Guardian*, and in the *Independent on Sunday*, another British newspaper.

The *Independent* column, headlined "The Shady Men Backed by the West to Displace Gaddafi," described the Libyan rebel commanders as follows: "The careers of several make them sound like characters out of the more sinister Graham Greene novels. They include men such as Colonel Khalifa Haftar, former commander of the Libyan army in Chad who was captured and changed sides in 1988, setting up the anti-Gaddafi Libyan National Army reportedly with CIA and Saudi backing. For the last 20 years, he has been living quietly in Virginia before returning to Benghazi to lead the fight against Gaddafi."

Finally, the *Washington Post's* Sunday edition carried several references to Haftar, including a front-page article profiling the divisions within the rebel military leadership. "Khalifa Haftar, a former army colonel who recently returned to Libya after living for many years in Falls Church, was initially hailed by the Transitional National Council as a leader who could help discipline the new army and train its largely volunteer ranks," *Post* reporter Tara Bahrapour wrote.

She then quoted TNC and rebel military spokesmen giving conflicting accounts, one saying Haftar had been removed from command, the other saying he remained in control of the military. A spokesman for the TNC, asked to explain the conflict in light of its earlier announcement of Haftar's appointment, said, "This is the position of the council today. The situation is fluid.... The political viewpoints change frequently."

Walter Pincus, the *Post's* long-time reporter on intelligence activities, himself a former CIA informer in the National Student Association, described Haftar as "a former Libyan army colonel who for years commanded the Libyan National Army (LNA), an anti-Gaddafi group." The article

said Haftar had “established the LNA, allegedly with backing from the CIA and Saudi elements.” It continued: “In 1996, he was reported to have been behind an alleged uprising in eastern Libya. By that time, he was already settled with his family in Falls Church.”

According to Pincus, “a senior intelligence official,” asked about the Libyan commander’s connection to the CIA, “said it was policy not to discuss such issues.”

The informal blackout on Haftar’s identity and CIA connections still continues on the American television networks and in the pages of the *New York Times*—a newspaper that openly admits its subservience to the US military/intelligence apparatus. But the significance of the weekend press reports is unmistakable: the Libyan rebel military is not the independent organ of a popular uprising against the Gaddafi dictatorship, but rather the creature of American imperialism, the most reactionary political force on the planet.

The dubious character of the Libyan rebels was further underscored in a remarkable profile published Saturday by the *Wall Street Journal* of three Libyans who had fought with Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan and were now playing major roles in the rebel military effort. Two of the three had been in US custody as alleged Al Qaeda operatives and one spent six years at Guantanamo Bay before being turned over to the Gaddafi regime in 2007. The three men are:

- Abdel Hakim al-Hasady, described as “an influential Islamic preacher and high school teacher who spent five years at a training camp in eastern Afghanistan” and now “oversees the recruitment, training and deployment of about 300 rebel fighters from Darna,” a city in eastern Libya
- Salah al-Barrani, “a former fighter from the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, or LIFG,” who is Hasady’s field commander
- 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,” and who “is training many of the city’s rebel recruits.”

Hasady and Ben Qumu were arrested by Pakistani security after the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and turned over to the US. Hasady was transferred to Libyan custody two months later, while Ben Qumu was moved to Guantanamo and held there until 2007, when he, too, was sent to a Libyan prison. The Gaddafi regime released both men in 2008, at a time when US-Libya collaboration in the “war on terror” was at its height. Such an action would certainly have been checked with Washington.

The former Al Qaeda warrior was quite willing to speak to the leading US business newspaper, which reported, “his discourse has become dramatically more pro-American.” He told the *Journal*, “If we hated the Americans 100 percent,

today it is less than 50 percent. They have started to redeem themselves for their past mistakes....”

Whether these individuals are Al Qaeda operatives who were “turned” by their American captors or have simply changed allegiance under changed circumstances is unclear. But their role in the Libyan opposition further undermines the longstanding propaganda of the US government about the supposedly unbridgeable gulf between Al Qaeda and American imperialism.

For a decade, the US government, under Bush and now Obama, has used the terrorist actions of Al Qaeda and its alleged supporters as a pretext for one military intervention after another in the Muslim world—Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, the Philippines, Indonesia and now Libya.

There has long been reason to doubt the “war on terror” narrative, not least the fact that Al Qaeda was effectively created by the CIA through its activities in recruiting and mobilizing radical Islamists to go to Afghanistan in the 1980s and join the mujaheddin guerrillas fighting the Soviet army there. Many of the 9/11 suicide hijackers were known to the CIA as Al Qaeda operatives, and in some cases under active surveillance, but were nonetheless allowed to enter the country, receive training at US flight schools and carry out the terrorist attacks.

An incident during a hearing Thursday before the House Armed Services Committee demonstrates the sensitivity of the US government concerning the links between US intelligence services and Al Qaeda. Democratic Congressman Brad Sherman questioned a witness, Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, about the role of Abdel Hakim al-Hasady. Steinberg refused to discuss the matter, suggesting it could be taken up only in a closed-door session where US covert operations are regularly reviewed.



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