

Al Qaeda's Top Recruiting Tool: The CIA

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What makes someone join Al Qaeda? In the case of Abu Yahya al-Libi, the Al Qaeda luminary killed in an American drone strike in Pakistan last June, his older brother has no doubt. Americans are culpable for his sibling's embrace of terrorism. He draws a direct line between al-Libi's recruitment by al Qaeda and the suffering he endured at the hands of American interrogators using techniques similar to those portrayed in the movie *Zero Dark Thirty*.

Al-Libi's slaying may have been one of the reasons Libyan jihadists attacked the U.S. consulate in Benghazi last September, an assault that led to the death of ambassador Christopher Stevens. In the days leading up to the attack, Al Qaeda's amir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, focused his annual 9/11 message on the drone war, eulogized al-Libi and called on "Libyan brothers" to avenge the loss.

Lamenting American missteps in the war on terror, Abd Al-Wahhab Muhammad Qaid says his brother had been in Afghanistan for 15 years, as a member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, but that he, "like all of us shunned Al Qaeda." That is, until his mistreatment at Bagram Air Base. "He was tortured very aggressively and humiliated. Naturally, for each action there's a reaction," he sighs.

Now the chairman of the national security committee in the General National Congress, Libya's parliament, Qaid hopes America will rethink how it combats Muslim extremists and base its actions on reason not emotions; on investigation and not supposition.

Sitting in the grand lobby of Tripoli's Rixos hotel for a rare interview with an American journalist, Qaid disclosed for the first time that, when he was jailed by the then-dictator Muammar Gaddafi, Americans seeking to understand his brother's psychology visited him in prison to explore whether his brother could be coaxed to break with Al Qaeda.

The American visits were made before his brother became second in command of Al Qaeda, suggesting the CIA had spotted quickly that he was a rising terrorist star. He told them that it might be possible to persuade his brother to leave Al Qaeda and return to Libya, if Gaddafi would guarantee no torture and no jail time.

The 45-year-old Qaid is an imposing man and favors traditional Libyan dress. When I met him he was wearing a black galabeya and white prayer cap. He is the third senior member of the now defunct Libyan Islamic Fighting Group I have interviewed in recent months. There are similarities between him and his former comrades-in-arms Abdelhakim Belhadj and Sami Mostefa al-Saadi. All three are highly thoughtful and they all exhibit a calm dignity I've seen in other long-serving political prisoners.

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And surprisingly none of them appear to bear any ill will to the West or Americans. All of them have tempered their beliefs and describe themselves as Islamist modernizers.

Belhadj and Saadi were among the 15 Libyan Islamists opposed to Gaddafi that the Americans and British delivered to Libya's spy chief, Musa Kusa. The Americans tortured several of them before rendering them illegally to Libya, where they were tortured again. When Gaddafi's intelligence boss interrogated al-Saadi he bragged: "Before 9/11, you went to countries where we couldn't reach you. But now, after 9/11, I can just pick up the phone and call MI6 or the CIA."

The renditions constitute one of the darkest chapters in the war on terror and they highlight a point Qaid is eager to convey: the failure of the West to distinguish between different Islamists and to view them all as being Al Qaeda.

Qaid wasn't rendered himself. He joined the LIFG after years as a student activist in Benghazi. His brother, an Islamic scholar, lagged him by two years and both ended up in Afghanistan. Qaid was captured in 1995 in Libya while on a clandestine mission, spending the next decade-and-a-half in Tripoli's notorious Abu Salim prison. His brother remained in Afghanistan but was swept up after the fall of the Taliban and handed over to the Americans by the Pakistani authorities.

Explaining why he joined the LIFG, Qaid says: "We rejected oppression. We wanted, like all Libyans, to live a free life, an honorable life, but unfortunately that wasn't possible. We were students and we tried to be peaceful but we had no space and many of my colleagues were killed and in 1989 I left Libya."

In Afghanistan the Libyan Islamists kept Al Qaeda at arm's length, he says. It is a claim several independent experts who have studied the group confirm. Osama bin Laden, on several occasions, urged the anti-Gaddafi Libyans to fold in with Al Qaeda and in two notable meetings in Kandahar he debated the Libyan Islamists. "He was polite, never lost his temper," al-Saadi told me. "He was soft-spoken but obdurate." And never more so than when the Libyans urged bin Laden to stop using Afghanistan as a base to attack the West.

Qaid wasn't part of those discussions—he was already in Abu Salim. But he says: "We were focused on Libya and Osama bin Laden was calling for international jihad and fighting against Christians. He had a very different agenda." The British and American governments, though, never picked up the difference. They were eager to benefit from the infamous March 2004 rapprochement between the Western powers and Gaddafi.

When his brother pulled off a legendary escape from Bagram air base along with several other detainees, there were few people around he could trust. "Belhadj and al-Saadi were gone from Afghanistan," says Qaid. "There were no Libyan Islamists left to guide him and he found others such as bin Laden. Al Qaeda adopted him and fed him their thoughts."

How does Qaid feel about the West in the wake of his brother's death? "I have no problem with the West—America or Europe," he says. And he is grateful for the support the Libyan revolution received at a critical time. He says Libya needs Western expertise now to build the state institutions of a new Libya and its democracy.

But he does disagree with how the war on terror has been fought and believes America has to adopt a new approach with Muslim extremists, one less reliant on force. "I hope America adopts dialogue and negotiation. I hope that America doesn't reach for force immediately."

It is an approach he favors in Libya, too, when dealing with radical Islamists in the East. He doesn't

believe core Al Qaeda was involved in the assault on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi. "I don't think there are strong networks of Al Qaeda in Libya but there are some Libyan jihadists who are inspired by the Al Qaeda message."

He remains appalled at the death of ambassador Stevens, arguing like many Libyans that he was "one of us and contributed very positively to our revolution." The last thing America should be thinking of doing, though, is using drones or Special Forces in Libya to hunt those responsible. "America should not try to bypass the Libyan government—it will prompt a reaction not just from the extremists but from all Libyans, who are sensitive to territorial sovereignty."

He knows that some in the West still harbor doubts about the motives of Libyan Islamists like himself—several of the group eventually did join Al Qaeda after the renditions. But he concludes our interview by opening up his huge hands and saying: "You may have heard about the brother of Abu Yahya, that extremist, that member of Al Qaeda, that terrorist. And now you are sitting with him. If you had judged me from all of that, you may have developed a very bad picture of me, but now you are talking with me and may have another picture."

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