POLICY STUDY #001: PROFILE OF AN IDEOLOGUE

Abu Yahya al-Libi

(Abu Yahya al-Libi, AFP/Getty Images; Intelwire.)

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In recent years, al-Qaeda has been able to make more effective use of advanced video technology and the Internet to spread its message and ideology. The group's enhanced production and distribution capabilities are evident in its propaganda operations; as journalist Peter Bergen has noted, al-Qaeda's video production arm al-Sahab has been able to disseminate "reasonably polished productions, with English subtitles, animation effects, and studio settings."[1] The terrorist group has been able to heavily saturate web forums frequented by jihadists with videos and written screeds from the organization's highest ranking commanders. This media campaign has assumed international proportions, and has won al-Qaeda a wider pool of recruits and supporters.

Al-Qaeda's sophisticated Internet campaign has helped to promote a new generation of jihadist ideologues pressing the case for war against the West. Analysts should pay attention to their messages: an understanding of contemporary jihadist ideology and rhetoric can illuminate how followers are drawn to the movement, the strategies that terrorists are likely to adopt, and fissures within and among Islamist groups that can be exploited. To that end,

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[1] Peter Bergen, "Where You Bin?," *New Republic*, Jan. 29, 2007.

FDD's Center for Terrorism Research has initiated a series of studies that profile the contemporary jihadist movement's most prominent ideologues.

One of the central figures in al-Qaeda's Web campaign is the Libyan sheikh Abu Yahya al-Libi. Also considered a senior commander in the organization's expansive hierarchical chain, al-Libi has been described as "a very charismatic, young, brash rising star" by Jarret Brachman, research director of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.[2] Al-Libi offers both political and theological commentary that is likely to help shape the next generation of jihadists. This paper thematically examines al-Libi's ideas.

The Militant Preacher

Though al-Libi gained international attention for his July 2005 escape from the American military prison in Bagram, Afghanistan, few other biographical details are available about him. In fact, much of the public information about his early life has been provided by al-Libi himself, and is thus subject to his self-styling.

According to the pan-Arab daily newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat*, al-Libi was born Muhammad Hassan Qayid, the younger brother of Libyan Islamic Fighting Group leader Abdul Wahhab Qayid Idris.[3] His precise date of birth is not known: *Asharq Al-Awsat* claimed in the summer of 2008 that al-Libi "is in his mid-thirties," while the *Washington Post* noted the previous year that al-Libi is "[b]elieved to be in his late 30s."[4] It is clear, though, that al-Libi was born into a period of rapid change in Libya. After the country's first oil fields were discovered in 1959, it experienced unprecedented growth and prosperity—but the oil wealth also had a divisive social impact, inflaming popular resentment toward elite classes.

In an April 2006 interview with the online jihadist magazine *Tora Bora*, al-Libi explained that he came to Afghanistan around 1990: "I was in Logar. After the fall of Najib[allah] I left Afghanistan, and returned during the time of the Taliban's rule."[5] He joined the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group while in Afghanistan, although the precise year is not known. After the fall of Mohammad Najibullah (the last president of the Soviet-backed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan), al-Libi went to Mauritania to study Islam.

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[2] Quoted in Michael Moss & Souad Mekhennet, "Rising Leader for Next Phase of Al Qaeda's War," *New York Times*, Apr. 4, 2008.

[3] Muhammad Al Shafey, "Libya: Jailed Islamic Group 'Preparing' to Renounce Armed Violence," *Asharq Alawsat*, July 7, 2008.

[4] Compare ibid. with Craig Whitlock & Munir Ladaa, "Al-Qaeda's New Leadership," *Washington Post*, Sept. 8, 2007.

[5] Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), "Al-Qaeda Fugitives from an American Prison in Afghanistan Continue to Promote Jihad via the Internet," MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 1160, May 10, 2006.

Some commentators overstate the extent of al-Libi's religious qualifications. The *New York Times*, for example, notes in a profile of al-Libi that

> one Islamist insider said that in addition to youth and charisma, Mr. Libi possessed one skill that Al Qaeda's leaders had been lacking: religious scholarship. Perhaps with this in mind, Al Qaeda is featuring Mr. Libi, who spent two years in Africa studying Islam, in as many of the videos as the group's top leaders, [Osama] bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahri.[6]

Contrary to the *Times*'s portrayal, al-Libi has no apparent training at a formal religious institution. As a senior American military intelligence officer told us, "We have no records concerning his enrollment at any recognized Islamic university in Africa or anywhere else under either his real name or any of his known aliases."[7] It seems that during his time in Mauritania, al-Libi studied theology alongside insurgents. Beyond that, Africa isn't exactly a prestigious place to study Islam from a Salafi-jihadist perspective: there is a heavy dose of anti-African racism within the movement's top echelons.

As the intelligence officer stated: "Near as we can determine, most of al-Libi's theological acumen was developed during his time fighting in North Africa. Because Salafist and Wahhabi influence has only recently started to penetrate the North African interior, many of the locals have their own Islamic theological traditions and al-Libi took a leading role in defending the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and its local allies in Mauritania" against scholars who condemned his interpretation of jihad and his dismissal of Mauritanian Islam.[8] This forced al-Libi to develop a degree of theological complexity; his writings and speeches delivered in both video and audio formats certainly display charisma and the capacity to make sophisticated religious arguments.

Because he is unable to boast of a formal religious education, al-Libi emphasizes the martial aspect of his training in Islamic studies. He has on multiple occasions suggested that Islamic scholars who do not join the mujahidin on the battlefield are in fact unqualified to weigh in on matters of theology because they "will wobble the moment they face the first obstacle and compromise on this jihad the moment they are offered the first bait of temptation."[9] He claims that such people "never felt any genuine responsibility toward this jihad, but consider it, as they say, a pressure card that they use should

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[6] Moss & Mekhennet, "Rising Leader for Next Phase of Al Qaeda's War."
[7] E-mail from senior American military intelligence officer, Oct. 10, 2008.
[8] Ibid.
[9] "Al-Qa'ida Figure Al-Libi Urges Somali 'Mujahidin' to Only Accept 'Islamic State,'" Open Source Center Summary in Arabic, June 22, 2008.

the need arise, and then they concede it with the first false gain they acquire."[10] They can be contrasted with scholars who have actually been on the battlefield, for "whoever tasted jihad, witnessed its glory, felt its value, and saw its effect cannot be impacted or shaken by aimless doubts or weak suspicions."[11]

In that vein, when theologian Sayyed Imam al-Sharif called on his followers to end their military jihad, al-Libi mockingly suggested that he should come "to the fields of jihad and the lands of the outposts so that he can argue with those mujahidin verbally to show them their mistakes."[12] Similarly, in a July 2008 audio message, he criticized an unnamed scholar who had not joined the mujahidin on the battlefields of Afghanistan.[13] And in a November 2006 video, al-Libi inveighed against Islamic scholars who failed to join the mujahidin in combat:

> Oh scholars of Islam, what has held you back from the caravan of the mujahidin: is it the fear of death and being killed? … Oh scholars of Islam: what has held you back from the arenas of jihad? Is it fear of severity, violence, and strength of the enemy? … Oh scholars of Islam: your nation is writhing in its wounds; your nation is writhing in the hell of the tragedies, hardship, and difficulty to which its enemies have driven it…. So, oh scholars of Islam: who will declare the word of truth? Who will stand up to these criminals? Who will expose their tyranny and the unbelief, atheism, apostasy, and war against Allah's religion of which they are guilty? Oh scholars of Islam: if you delay, who will step forward? Oh scholars of Islam: if you are remiss, who will lead the way?[14]

When al-Libi returned to Afghanistan following his time in Mauritania, the Taliban controlled the majority of the country, and a network of terrorist training camps catered to Islamic militants. Al-Libi preached in the camps. One Libyan man who saw him in action reported that al-Libi "started to visit training camps and talk about Shariah," and also about "morals, etiquette, how to act."[15]

Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, al-Libi was arrested in Karachi, Pakistan in 2002. Indeed, much of his notoriety comes from the fact that he escaped from the U.S. military prison in Bagram, Afghanistan, in 2005. On a subsequent jihadist video, al-Libi and the other escapees dramatically recounted

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[10] Ibid.
[11] "Abu-Yahya al-Libi Blames Sayyid Imam's Document on Egyptian Intelligence," Open Source Center Summary, Mar. 11, 2008.
[12] Ibid.
[13] "In New Audio, Abu-Yahya al-Libi Calls on Shaykh to Physically be with the Mujahidin," Open Source Center Summary, July 11, 2008.
[14] "Al Sahab Issues New Al-Libi Video," Open Source Center Report, Nov. 3, 2006.
[15] Quoted in Moss & Mekhennet, "Rising Leader for Next Phase of Al Qaeda's War."

how they broke free, and a newer version even re-enacts scenes from the escape. Following the announced death of another escapee (Abu Abdullah al-Shami) in August 2008, al-Libi remains the only living Bagram prison escapee.[16]

The escape from Bagram was almost certainly responsible for al-Libi's fast rise among the ranks of al-Qaeda's leadership. The *New York Times* described al-Libi as "obscure" at the time of his escape, but notes that since then he has had a "meteoric ascent within the leadership of Al Qaeda."[17]

Salafi Methodology

In his speeches and writings, al-Libi makes clear that he sees his fight as religiously driven. For example, in June 2008 a forum participant at a jihadist Web site posted an essay from al-Libi rejecting the term "resistance" to describe his compatriots' fighting. He felt that the term "resistance" is inappropriate even though it is intended to provide a positive image of the war that al-Qaeda and other Islamist groups are waging, by painting them as responding to Western encroachments and not aggressing. Al-Libi believes that their fight can only properly be called "jihad" because using the terminology of "resistance" would "relegate the true meaning of jihad to newly invented meaning and modern concepts that have no relation to the Islamic legal and correct concepts."[18] That statement is reflective both of his religiously-based motivations, and also the Salafi methodology that al-Libi employs.

Salafi ideology is rooted in the fundamental belief that Islam is unchanging. Not only is scripture (the Qur'an) inviolable, but so too should society be governed according to the rules that Prophet Muhammad established fourteen centuries ago. Any deviation from Allah's commands or Muhammad's example is heresy at best, and may even cast the deviant believer outside the fold of Islam. As al-Libi has stated, "[s]ince the religion is that of Almighty God, there is no place for tampering with it to suit one's likings; for engaging in ideas, opinions, mind games, and analysis; for concerning oneself with pleasing people; for submitting to the calls to keep up with the modern age." Rather, "[t]he religion of God leads and will not be led."[19]

Al-Libi's above-referenced discussion of the terminology employed to describe the jihadists' warfare provides an excellent example of his Salafi methodology in action. He begins by describing the importance of the

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[16] "Afghanistan: Al-Arabiya Notes Al-Qa'ida 'New Technique' of Announcing Its Deaths," Open Source Center translation of Al-Arabiyah TV (Dubai), Aug. 1, 2008.
[17] Moss & Mekhennet, "Rising Leader for Next Phase of Al Qaeda's War."
[18] "Forum Participant Posts Abu-Yahya Al-Libi Essay on 'Jihad or Resistance,'" Open Source Center Summary in Arabic, June 8, 2008.
[19] "In Video Message, Abu-Yahya al-Libi Criticizes 'Moderation' in Islam," Open Source Center Summary, May 23, 2008.

terminology one uses, explaining that Islamic "legal terminology, with its preserved and precise forms, has always had a certain reverence and a special place in our hearts."[20] But conversely, the terms one chooses "can be used as a backdoor to undermine Islam." An individual hostile to the religion can use control of relevant language "to disparage and distort [Islam's] rulings, to falsify its truths, and contaminate its purity." Thus, just as the faithful should be cautious of efforts to "modernize" or alter the fundamentals of the religion, so to should they be wary of the terminology employed in describing their actions and legal opinions. Indeed, the widespread use of improper Islamic terminology could be a first step to undermining and changing the religion: "legal problems will emerge, categorical rulings will be manipulated, established truths will be changed, and the doors to strife will be opened."

What is the specific problem with the use of the word "resistance" to describe the jihadists' fight? Al-Libi sees the word being used to describe cases of what might be dubbed "defensive jihad," such as the fighting against coalition forces in Afghanistan or Iraq. Adoption of the term "resistance" rather than "jihad" has in fact led some commentators to speak of "legitimate resistance," a term that al-Libi says "has become so common, and considered an axiom that it is frequently uttered by even those considered prominent [Islamic] scholars." The term "legitimate resistance," of course, is frequently used by some Muslim commentators to distinguish al-Qaeda's acts from instances of fighting in Israel or Iraq for which—rightly or wrongly—there is more widespread support throughout the Islamic world. But for al-Libi the problem is not just that the idea of "legitimate resistance" is used to delegitimize his group's activities. Rather, it causes the debate about what kind of combat is legitimate to be conducted according to the nonbelievers' standards:

> It is evident that what they mean by the expression "legitimate resistance" in that they speak to "those who believe neither in Allah nor the Last Day…." [It] is not legitimacy according to Islam, that is the defensive jihad, rather, what they mean is the Western concept of legitimacy according to international resolutions. These resolutions sometimes recognize and permit this kind of "resistance" and criminalize and forbid everything else. They refuse to refer to anything else as "resistance," even if it was a legitimate jihad [according to Islam] and a command from God.

Al-Libi's discussion of the terms "jihad" and "resistance" is indicative of his Salafi methodology—and also shows how many of his other major themes stem

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[20] Al-Libi's discussion of the propriety of the term "jihad" rather than "resistance" can be found in "Forum Participant Posts Abu-Yahya al-Libi Essay on 'Jihad or Resistance,'" Open Source Center.

from this methodology. One of his recurring themes is the obligation to undertake jihad. Al-Libi shows how that obligation stems from his Salafi interpretation, and how any movement to dilute that interpretation—even changing the terminology that is used to describe the jihad—threatens to undermine it. Al-Libi also ties his Salafi interpretation to his overarching belief in a conspiracy against Islam: by controlling the language one uses to describe jihadists' fighting, the enemies of Islam can control the discourse, control how Muslims conceptualize their duty to fight, and ultimately "disparage and distort" Islamic rulings. This thematic cohesion can be seen throughout al-Libi's speeches and writings, and indeed is one of his strengths as a communicator.

The Obligation of Jihad

A central theme in al-Libi's public statements is the requirement that Muslims undertake jihad against non-Muslims. Consistent with the generally recognized Islamic understanding of jihad, al-Libi distinguishes between defensive and offensive modes of jihad. He argues that "there is complete agreement of the scholars, from the first to the last among them of Fiqh, Tafsir and Hadith that when an enemy invades a Muslim land or a country, Jihad becomes an individual obligation on the people of the land."[21] He is referring here to the distinction between *fard kifaya* and *fard ayn*. *Fard kifaya* refers to communal obligations on the Muslims as a whole: so long as some in the community are undertaking the obligation, not every Muslim is required to do so. In contrast, *fard ayn* obligations apply to each and every individual. He argues that if a Muslim country is attacked, defense is *fard ayn*: all Muslims are obligated to participate. "If an enemy attacks a Muslim land," al-Libi says, "he must be fought until he is driven away. If they cannot, then their neighbors must do that. And if they can't, their neighbors must, and so on until the entire Muslim Ummah must enter the battle."[22]

Al-Libi believes that the conditions for a defensive jihad are now satisfied. The global war on terror, for one, constitutes a war against Islamic territory in his eyes. "The wise and intellectual of the Islamic nation's clerics and the mujahidin leaders said at the first gusts of wind that this is a clear infidel Crusader war against Islam and the Muslims," he said in May 2008. "The efforts and steps of its possessors will not stop at a limit, and they will not be satisfied, as they allege, at the perseverance to eliminate the mujahidin group and one concession will not

[21] Abu Yahya al-Libi, "They Have Lied, the Fighting Has Just Begun," posted on *Ulema of Jihad: Spreading the Haq*, Dec. 19, 2007.
[22] SITE Intelligence Group, "Abu Yahya Al-Libi Calls Muslims to Arms and Jihad in Video from As-Sahab," Dec. 19, 2007.

pass until they demand another."[23] Indeed, to al-Libi the attack on Islam goes far beyond physical invasion of Muslim lands: he suggests that even the concept of "moderation" in Islam is part of a conspiracy to "uproot and demolish Islam in order to transform the Islamic nation—the entire Islamic nation—from clarity to blindness, from certainty to doubt and from belief to disbelief."[24] This gives rise to an interesting question that al-Libi does not answer: in the absence of the physical presence of non-Muslim forces in Islamic lands, do attempts by nonbelievers to influence the direction of Islam in themselves constitute a *casus belli*?

Somali Militia Fighters
(European Pressphoto
Agency)

However, al-Libi does not believe that the obligation to undertake combat against nonbelievers is limited to instances of defensive jihad. In a June 2008 video addressing the conflict in Somalia, al-Libi outlines several important principles related to his understanding of jihad.[25] The al-Qaeda-linked Islamic Courts Union (ICU) succeeded in conquering the majority of Somalia in 2006, leaving the U.N.-recognized transitional federal government (TFG) hunkered down in the south-central Somali city of Baidoa. Just as ICU forces appeared to be on the verge of overrunning the TFG in December 2006, the Ethiopian military (which had been protecting the transitional government) responded with greater force than expected. The Ethiopians and TFG wrested Mogadishu from the Islamic Courts on December 28, 2006, and reversed most of the ICU's geographic gains in a short time. Ultimately, however, the Ethiopians and TFG were unable to "win the peace," and there is now heavy insurgent fighting throughout the country.

The first point al-Libi makes in the video, addressing the idea that the Ethiopian occupation force is the true enemy rather than other Somalis, is that "the religion of Islam does not differentiate between an external enemy and an internal enemy." Rather, the religion "urges us to fight those who are close to us before fighting those who are far away whenever we find the means of doing so." Thus, the mujahidin should fight ruthlessly regardless of whether the enemy is Ethiopian, American, or Somali, since "the unbelievers are protectors, one of another."[26]

Al-Libi's second point is that the war does not end once the Ethiopians have withdrawn. He concedes that after an Ethiopian withdrawal, some will say: "Now

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[23] "In Video Message, Abu-Yahya al-Libi Criticizes 'Moderation' in Islam," Open Source Center.
[24] Ibid.
[25] This discussion can be found in "Al-Qa'ida Figure Al-Libi Urges Somali 'Mujahidin' to Only Accept 'Islamic State,'" Open Source Center.
[26] Here al-Libi is referencing verse 8:73 of the Qur'an.

the war is over and the occupiers have left. Therefore, your fighting against the Somali government and those who stood by it is an illegitimate civil war." Al-Libi rejects this view, stating that "believers are close brothers, even if they are strangers; and disbelievers are sworn enemies, even if they are close relatives." Thus, the war should continue even after the Ethiopians have left: the TFG should also be fought because al-Libi considers them to be nonbelievers as well. In making this point, al-Libi makes clear that the mujahidin's fighting is based not only on the presence of non-Muslim forces in an Islamic land, and that the obligation to undertake jihad is not limited to purely defensive circumstances.

Al-Libi's third point is that the mujahidin should "never place the fate of your jihad in the hands of those who never tried this jihad, lived in the areas of jihad, shouldered the burdens of jihad." This is in line with al-Libi's tendency, discussed earlier, to elevate participation in jihad as a necessary qualification to have a religious opinion on it.

He concludes by saying that the mujahidin should reject any international peacekeeping force—whether from the African Union, the U.N., or another international organization—in place of the Ethiopians. He states that all of these organizations "are in fact an attempt to replace an occupation with another occupation." All them, he says, are illegitimate in Muslim eyes. The mujahidin should accept nothing less "than an independent Islamic state that does not recognize any international legitimacy, [or] accept earthly laws."

These four paradigmatic points—the obligation to fight both the near and far enemy, the idea that the fight is not just against occupation forces but also "apostates" from within the Muslim ranks, the notion that only those who have participated in the jihad can weigh in theologically, and the rejection of international institutions in favor of establishing an Islamic state—are indicative of al-Libi's approach to the concept of jihad. As with his Salafi methodology, al-Libi's idea of jihad coheres with his other major themes. In his discussion of Somalia, al-Libi is able to also interweave his belief in the conspiracy against Islam, the necessity of an Islamic state, and the illegitimacy of all moral and ethical judgments that are not rooted in a Salafist interpretation of Islamic law.

Existential Conflict

Related to al-Libi's idea of jihad is his belief that Islam and the modern West (especially the United States) are locked in an existential conflict. The threat to Islam is not only physical, but is also mental and ideological. As the narrator in a 2008 jihadist video featuring al-Libi stated: "The battle of the Zio-Crusader enemy against our Ummah isn't waged solely at the military and economic level,

but is waged first and foremost … at the level of doctrine."[27] Islam's enemies, in al-Libi's view, seek to dilute the faith's ideals and thereby dissipate its vigor.

As he indicated in his discussion of the conflict in Somalia, al-Libi believes that international organizations are part of the conspiracy—threatening to undermine true Islamic belief by propagating standards that are not rooted in Islamic law. These organizations offer agreements that should be viewed "as an integral part of the grand conspiracy and the covert intrigue, which the enemies of Muslims have mastered to enable them to prolong their domination on this earth."[28] But the conspiracy goes far beyond that. Even the idea of a "moderate" Islam is part of the conspiracy:

> In the name of moderation and self-control, the cunning sought to abolish and erase many of the sharia expressions and words that irritate the infidel West and prevent rapprochement and understanding. They used the word "the other," instead of the word "the infidel," and they replaced the word "atheist" by the word "non-Muslim," and they portrayed the religion of Christianity and Judaism as "Divine religions."[29]

Al-Libi believes that if these ideas that undermine the Islamic faith are not resisted, the end result "will be the creation of a new religion," a religion that is new "in its terminology, new in its perception, new in its measures and principles, new in its creed and its branches, and even new in its worship and transactions and new in its reception sources."[30] Al-Libi claims that Muslims will be told that this new faith is the true "moderate Islam," but that "it is only the Islam of the Rand Corporation and the enemies."[31]

With the efforts to undermine Islam this far-reaching and insatiable, there is no room for compromise. In al-Libi's cosmology, the present conflict is a stark struggle between good and evil. Muslims' identity as believers is sacred, more important than family ties, and this sacred identity must be defended at all costs. The inverse is also true: Muslims must reject any kind of closeness with non-Muslims. As al-Libi has said, "disbelievers are sworn enemies, even if they are close relatives." Even the Prophet Muhammad "fought his family and the sons of his tribe before he fought others."[32] Leaders like George W. Bush, Pervez

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[27] "Al-Sahab Video Presents 'The Word is the Word of the Swords 1' Video," Open Source Center Summary, Sept. 6, 2008.
[28] "Al-Qa'ida Figure Al-Libi Urges Somali 'Mujahidin' to Only Accept 'Islamic State,'" Open Source Center.
[29] "In Video Message, Abu-Yahya al-Libi Criticizes 'Moderation' in Islam," Open Source Center.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] "Al-Qa'ida Figure Al-Libi Urges Somali 'Mujahidin' to Only Accept 'Islamic State,'" Open Source Center.

Musharraf, and Abdelaziz Bouteflika are "soldiers of the devil," and those who fight in their armies are "the agents of Satan."[33]

Al-Libi's idea of an existential conflict between Islam and the modern world fits with his overarching theme of the necessity of jihad. With the grave dangers confronting Islam, there is no other option. There can be no middle ground, no compromise, since even discussions of peace negotiations are themselves part of the conspiracy against Islam.

The Threat from Within

Part of the reason Islam faces an existential threat, in al-Libi's view, is that its adherents have a weak and distorted understanding of the faith.

Sayyed Imam al-Sharif (*Al Arabiya* file photo)

One example of the threat from within is theologians such as Sayyed Imam al-Sharif (better known as "Doctor Fadl"), who previously supported al-Qaeda but has since then called for an end to military jihad. In a book entitled *The Document of Right Guidance for Jihad Activity in Egypt and the World*, al-Sharif argued that contemporary jihadists are acting in an Islamically inappropriate manner for a variety of reasons, including the fact that they do not enjoy "parity in numbers and equipment" with their enemies."[34] Al-Libi is dismissive of this book, claiming that it is clearly the work of Egypt's security services rather than al-Sharif. "The mere fact that this document came out from the dungeons of deception and treachery shows you its true nature and makes you ponder the motives behind it and makes you stop and think about every word in it," al-Libi said in a 39-minute video response to al-Sharif's book. "Do not let the exploitation of the writer's name used to promote the document fool you."[35] Al-Libi asks why al-Sharif is still imprisoned "if that document expresses the belief of its writer to whom it is attributed," and then mockingly states that if the book had been "adopted by the Egyptian security services and was signed by one of their officers and the heads of non-belief in it and was presented to the mujahidin as advice from the security service to ensure the success of jihad ... everybody would have laughed at them."[36]

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[33] SITE Intelligence Group, "Abu Yahya Al-Libi Calls Muslims to Arms."

[34] MEMRI, "Major Jihadi Cleric and Author of Al-Qaeda's Shari'a Guide to Jihad Sayyed Imam vs. Al-Qaeda," MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 1826, Jan. 25, 2008. For more on al-Sharif's about-face, see Abdul Hameed Bakier, "Imprisoned Leader of Egypt's Islamic Jihad Challenges al-Qaeda," *Terrorism Monitor*, Dec. 10, 2007; Eli Lake, "Senior Qaeda Theologian Urges His Followers to End Their Jihad," *New York Sun*, Dec. 20, 2007.

[35] "Abu-Yahya al-Libi Blames Sayyid Imam's Document on Egyptian Intelligence," Open Source Center.

[36] Ibid.

It is for this reason, al-Libi concludes, that Egypt's security services used al-Sharif's name when publishing the document.

While al-Libi does not blame all of the backlash against al-Qaeda within Muslim circles on intelligence services, he does see a conspiratorial hand at play. As mentioned earlier, he sees the idea of "moderation" in Islam as the product of those who seek to undermine the faith. He describes a conspiracy of those who are working "to divert people from their religion; plant doubts in their minds about their fundamental beliefs."[37] That is why, he claims, "whenever any obscure person merely speaks and mumbles words that expose the mujahidin, their media will rush to make him prominent and famous."[38] He says that such people will be rewarded with "continuous discussions and successive interviews to guide the worshipers of God to this unique idea that burst out of a madman's mind."[39] Al-Libi singles out the relatives of prominent figures within the jihadist community as being used in this way.

He also views interfaith dialogue, particularly the conference that Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah sponsored in Madrid, Spain, in July 2008,[40] as part of the internal threat. Al-Libi issued a video on July 28, 2008, describing interfaith dialogue as "a new step in the crusader war." In it, he charges that the call for "fraternization of the three religions" was "not spontaneous or impromptu," but rather that the aim of this dialogue was to create a new religion that would represent the convergence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Al-Libi said: "They want us to lose our personality and identity under the banner of reform, fraternity, coexistence, and peace."[41] Indeed, al-Libi paints a picture of a stark future where only the practice of this new, hybrid religion will be allowed:

> Searching for common threads that link [Islam] with Judaism and Christianity so that it might become something upon which the people of the tripartite might agree on is this modern religion which allows calls for it and denial of anyone who might reject it. People are forced to believe it and accept it, and the proselytizers of evil and scholars of delusion might name this in a manner which might trick people into believing it is a part of their religion and their customs. They might say "it is interfaith dialogues" or "a good natured debate" or "a proselytization for wisdom and good natured preaching" or

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[37] "In Video Message, Abu-Yahya al-Libi Criticizes 'Moderation' in Islam," Open Source Center.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] For discussion of this initiative, see Joseph Goldstein, "Saudi King Denounces Extremism, Touts Islam's 'Moderation and Tolerance," *New York Sun*, July 17, 2008; Claude Salhani, "Roots of Inter-Faith Animosity Run Deep," *Middle East Times*, July 17, 2008.
[41] Abu Yahya al-Libi, "Interfaith Dialogue: A New Step in the Crusader War," Open Source Center Summary in Arabic, July 28, 2008.

"proselytization for moderation and temperance." ... They are not concerned after all this with whether the whole world becomes deluded or if the Islamic nation splinters or if it loses its splendor and glory among desires and whims.[42]

An interfaith convergence would corrode Islam's monotheism, making "monotheism a brother to polytheism and deprecation. It raises the mosque next to the church and synagogue and places the Koran on equal footing with falsified books like the Torah and the Bible."[43]

It is worth noting that al-Libi's argument is based on a logical fallacy: that dialogue between the faiths is designed to create, or will inevitably lead to the creation of, a new "consensus" faith that bridges Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. One participant in a jihadist Web forum called him on this, writing: "Al-Libi has distorted the call for [interfaith] dialogue by using expressions such as 'creating a new religion' and 'convergence of the three religions'. These are lies and fabrications."[44]

Nonetheless, interfaith dialogue is to al-Libi one of the internal threats to Islam. This idea of internal threat is also tied to his Salafi methodology: those who advocate a "moderate Islam" or otherwise seek to undercut the jihadists' message are following their own desires rather than authentic Islamic teachings. In doing so, they use numerous ploys—ranging from their use of the media to adoption of a secularized vocabulary to such institutions as interfaith dialogue—to distort the true interpretation of Islam.

Shiism

Shias are a major target of al-Libi's scorn. One of his many complaints about Saudi Arabia's interfaith conference is the inclusion of Shia leaders. According to the majority of Salafi scholars, Shiism is not a legitimate sect of Islam. Al-Libi shares this view, derisively labeling the Shias "polytheists," and "rejectionists" for their rejection of the first three caliphs.

Explaining how deviant the interfaith dialogue process is, he states that "even the polytheist rejectionists, against whom numerous decrees about their atheism were issued only yesterday ... have become partners with (those who belong to the tolerant religion) in representing Muslims in conferences that are held for interfaith dialogues."[45] He poses a rhetorical question to the Sunni Muslims who participated in these talks: "Have the polytheist rejectionists found

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[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] "Forum Member Condemns Abu-Yahya al-Libi, Sees 'Opportunity' in Interfaith Talks," Open Source Center summary in Arabic, July 29, 2008.
[45] Abu Yahya al-Libi, "Interfaith Dialogue: A New Step in the Crusader War."

the right path, or have you, oh promoters and supporters of interfaith dialogue, gone astray?"[46]

In fact, just as al-Libi believes that the promoters of interfaith conferences are seeking a convergence between Islam and other monotheistic faiths, so too are they seeking a convergence between Sunni and Shia Islam. He accuses the House of Saud of taking "a long leap in which interfaith convergence between the Sunnis and the Shiites has become one of the uncontested issues."[47] Al-Libi concludes that "honest scholars have often stood against calls for convergence between Sunnis and Shiites who claim to be Muslims."[48]

Battlefronts

Al-Libi has spoken of a number of key battlefronts in the war against the West. In his speeches and writings, he has mentioned many of the traditional conflict zones. In a 2006 interview with jihadist magazine *Tora Bora*, he praised developments in Afghanistan—noting that the mujahidin were no longer confined to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, but were now "hitting in the heart of Afghanistan, [targeting] the sensitive bases of the apostate Muslims [*murtaddin*] and the Americans."[49]

Al-Libi has discussed the jihad in Somalia at some length publicly. As discussed earlier, he released a 19 minute, 52 second video in June 2008 devoted entirely to imploring the mujahidin not to accept peace negotiations with the country's transitional government, and not to accept the mediation offered by international institutions.[50] In that video, he also singles out for praise late jihadist leaders who fought in Iraq, Algeria, Afghanistan, and Chechnya. In 2007, al-Libi also called for the overthrow of Pervez Musharraf, who served as Pakistan's president until late 2008.[51]

And al-Libi is unique among senior al-Qaeda leaders in both the amount of public discussion he has devoted to Saudi Arabia, and also the vitriol with which he does so. In condemning the Madrid interfaith conference, al-Libi branded King Abdullah an apostate seeking the destruction of Islam. Al-Libi said that the conference was "the call that the tyrant of the Arabian Peninsula, Abdullah bin Abdal Aziz, actively advocated with open boldness and clear apostasy; ignoring the denial of those who oppose it and not paying attention to the call of the

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[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] MEMRI, "Al-Qaeda Fugitives from an American Prison in Afghanistan Continue to Promote Jihad via the Internet."
[50] "Al-Qa'ida Figure Al-Libi Urges Somali 'Mujahidin' to Only Accept 'Islamic State,'" Open Source Center.
[51] See Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda Leader Calls for the Overthrow of Pakistan's Musharraf," *Long War Journal*, Aug. 1, 2007.

faithful."[52] Al-Libi argues that the call for interfaith dialogue is part of a carefully crafted conspiracy against Islam.

This is in line, al-Libi argues, with previous Saudi transgressions against Islam—such as the House of Saud's decision to allow American military forces into Saudi Arabia following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. "[T]he tyrants of Al Saud lured the Crusader forces in the thousands, with all their armies, their sheer numbers, their equipment, and their gear to the point where they established themselves within the homes on the lands of the Muslims," al-Libi says.[53] He argues that this is unacceptable Islamically, flouting Prophet Muhammad's command to "expel the polytheists from the Arabian Peninsula."

By this account, Saudi Arabia is not a legitimate Islamic state: it is a Muslim territory that has been appropriated by apostates and infidels who are "laying the groundwork for the invasion of minds after having eased the invasion of fortresses."[54] Thus, al-Libi calls for the Saudi king's death. He says that "killing this reckless tyrant, who has declared himself as one of the imams of atheism, will be one of the greatest *qurubat*," acts that draw one closer to God.[55] "Who is going to kill this tyrant," al-Libi asks, "who manipulated Islam, allied himself with the Jews and the Christians against the Muslims, filled his prisons with the chosen monotheists [mujahidin], fooled with the religion of monotheism and befriended those who insulted the prophet, headed by the worshiper of the cross, the pope of the Vatican?"[56]

Conclusion

Al-Libi has risen quickly through al-Qaeda's ranks for a variety of reasons. His escape from the Bagram prison has become legendary in jihadist circles—but he is also aided by his charisma, and his appeal as a religious scholar (though one whose credentials may be questioned) and a warrior. Al-Libi is able to combine a sarcastic, biting wit with a thematic cohesion that makes his words and ideas persuasive. Moreover, his speeches are concrete, tied to news and events that are of practical significance to his considerable audience.

Al-Libi's speeches and writings will help to shape the next generation of jihadists. While he may not instruct in specific military tactics or bomb-building techniques, he equips terrorists and insurgents with unwavering resolve, spiritual guidance, and absolute belief in the urgency of their mission. These cannot be easily shut down by pure force.

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[52] Abu Yahya al-Libi, "Interfaith Dialogue: A New Step in the Crusader War."
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.