

The Limits of Reconciliation

ASSESSING THE REVISIONS OF THE LIBYAN ISLAMIC
FIGHTING GROUP (LIFG)



ABOUT THE PROJECT

The [Institute for Integrated Transitions \(IFIT\)](#) is an international think tank that brings together under one roof the best of theory and practice in relation to successful negotiations and transitions out of conflict or authoritarian rule.

This paper is part of a project that aims to fill a major gap in policy making: the failure to integrate lessons learnt and best practices from the field of transitional justice in relation to conflict resolution strategies with two kinds of unconventional armed actors: 1) “violent extremist” groups, such as jihadists; and 2) organised crime groups, such as mafia, gang networks and drug cartels. IFIT’s work on the former began in 2017 with the UN University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR). The project was concerned with the fact that, to date, what has reigned is an overwhelmingly punitive and dragnet approach which, rather than helping address root causes and break cycles of resentment and violence, instead risks renewing or reinforcing them. This resulted in [three jointly-published](#) case studies ([ISIS in Iraq](#), [Al-Shabaab in Somalia](#), and [Boko Haram in Nigeria](#)) and an initial [policy framework](#).

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Building on this initial work, IFIT launched a second phase of research in 2019 on the same broad topic, drawing on lessons from a wider range of country situations where comparable challenges have been grappled with, in order to provide expanded guidance for policymakers. This involved fieldwork-based reports covering Libya (focused on the LIFG), Uganda (focused on the LRA), and Afghanistan (focused on the Taliban), all of which examine the intersection of negotiation and transitional justice goals. IFIT commissioned additional taxonomy research to plot identifiable similarities and differences of motivation, structure, and context along a wide spectrum of different archetypes of non-state or unconventional armed groups. All of this informed a final framework that aims to help policymakers tailor more effective negotiation and transitional justice strategies to address root causes, break cycles of violence, and strengthen the rule of law in settings affected by violent extremism.

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Acronyms

AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
GIA	Armed Islamic Group (of Algeria)
IS	Islamic State
LIFG	Libyan Islamic Fighting Group
LIMC	Libyan Islamic Movement for Change
MI6	British Foreign Intelligence Service
NTC	National Transitional Council

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Introduction

In August 2009, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) – a Salafi-jihadist¹ organisation formed by Libyan veterans of the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, which posed what was once considered the most serious threat to Muammar Gaddafi – published a set of revisions declaring the end of their armed campaign against the Gaddafi regime. The 417-page document, “Corrective Studies in the Concepts of Jihad, Accountability and the Judgment of People”, was the culmination not only of several years of internal debate within the group but also of dialogue between the leadership of the LIFG (which negotiated from prison and thus had a strong self-interest in using the dialogue as an opportunity to regain its freedom) and the Libyan authorities.

The revisions process took place during a decade when some within the Libyan regime – chiefly Gaddafi’s son Saif al-Islam – began tentatively incorporating elements of transitional justice in order to address legacy issues, including the Abu Selim prison massacre.² This took place against broader ad hoc efforts to reform the Libyan state as part of its process of re-engaging with the international community, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom.

While the process that led to these revisions was very much a product of the Libyan context and the LIFG’s specific evolution as a group, the treatise that resulted – drawing on a range of references from key Islamic texts to denounce extremism and the use of violence to instigate change – held relevance beyond Libya. The doctrinal arguments developed by the LIFG signatories echoed and built on those made by Egypt’s Islamic Group and al-Jihad Organisation during their de-radicalisation process earlier that decade. A number of prominent Islamic scholars – including in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Mauritania – publicly endorsed the LIFG’s revisions document, thus giving a wider audience to their theological and ideological repudiation of violence against one’s own rulers. Authorities in Algeria and Mauritania incorporated the LIFG text into their own prison de-radicalisation programmes.

After overcoming scepticism within the wider security apparatus, Gaddafi’s heir apparent, Saif al-Islam, drove the de-radicalisation process on the regime side and heavily publicised its outcomes in order to bolster his own reformist credentials. In return for their renunciation of armed opposition to the Gaddafi regime, LIFG prisoners and other inmates who signed up to the treatise (even if they were not members of the LIFG) were freed from jail in a series of mass releases, the final of which took place two days before 17 February 2011 – the date Libyans who supported the uprising that ousted Gaddafi that year say their revolution began. The LIFG, though then considered defunct, subsequently emerged under a different name to participate in the uprising, with several figures, including Abdelhakim Belhaj, the man who last held the title emir (or leader) of the group, playing key roles that year and during the post-Gaddafi period.

Sceptics of the revisions process point to the participation of the former LIFG leadership in the 2011 uprising to argue that their engagement with the process was “more transactional than transformative”.³ However, the fact they embraced a democratic transition for post-Gaddafi Libya – founding political parties, running for election and serving in key posts in transitional governments – suggests they had moved beyond their jihadist past. Although several former LIFG leaders maintained links with armed groups (as did other political players and factions scrambling for influence in the post-2011 period), their participation in democratic politics not only served to distance themselves from the country’s jihadist milieu but also drew criticism from the younger militants that inhabited it.

In brief, the revisions process marked a major juncture in the LIFG’s history. This paper shows that while the resulting recantations were to a significant degree a product of circumstance in that the group’s leaders were negotiating while imprisoned, they were already on a path that would lead them to abandon the jihadist worldview they had adopted as young men. In agreeing to end their jihad they were not, however, agreeing they would stop being opponents of the regime.

The paper begins with a background section that: discusses the Libyan and international context when the LIFG first organised itself; traces the group’s history from its emergence to when negotiations with the Gaddafi regime began; and outlines state responses to the LIFG before negotiations were considered, including military repression and detention practices. The following section details how a negotiated deal was initially approached, exploring the motivations of both the LIFG leadership and the Gaddafi regime. The next section discusses the de-radicalisation process itself, examining the five factors that proved key: the role of leaders; the role of mediators; the dynamic between the imprisoned LIFG leadership and those outside; trust building between the LIFG and the Gaddafi regime; and the use of incentives. It also explores how much notions of transitional justice informed the process and were understood by participants. Thereafter, the paper includes a section that examines the content of the LIFG revisions and the impact they had on the wider jihadist milieu outside Libya. This is followed by a concluding section that analyses the role played by the former LIFG during the uprising that ousted Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 and in the transitional period that followed.

The paper is based primarily on fieldwork and in-depth interviews with several of the main actors in the LIFG de-radicalisation process, including most of the signatories of the revisions document and a number of Gaddafi regime officials. Interviews were also conducted with mid-level and rank-and-file members of the former LIFG, as well as other non-aligned Libyan Islamists who were imprisoned with them. Former jihadists of other nationalities were interviewed on how the LIFG revisions process and treatise influenced militant currents beyond the Libyan context. The paper also draws on interviews with sources who participated in the 2011 uprising and prominent figures from the period that followed, including officials from several transitional governments. Cumulatively, the interviewed sources provide a unique, first-hand and historical perspective on events that remain highly contested in the country. In that regard, this account seeks to inform the discourse surrounding this under-researched area of Libya’s past while linking it to its present.

Background Context

The Politics of the LIFG

“Angry Young Men”

The nucleus of what was to become the LIFG was initially comprised of young Libyans, most of whom were in their 20s. They were veterans of the wars in Afghanistan that followed the Soviet invasion and occupation of that country. Most of those who later became part of the LIFG’s consultative Shura Council were already opposed to the Gaddafi regime before they left Libya to join the anti-Soviet forces referred to broadly as “the mujahideen” in Afghanistan. Some of those from Tripoli had already started organising as students. Indeed, several traced their initial radicalisation to witnessing the suppression of student protests in Libya in the 1970s and 1980s.⁴ In a number of cases, student dissidents were publicly hanged on campuses in the capital, Tripoli, and in Benghazi, Libya’s second city. “Very early on, we considered armed struggle against the regime and developed our thinking on that basis”, recalled Abdelhakim Belhai, who later became leader of the LIFG.⁵

“We were not leftists or communists and the only thing that brought us together was the mosque. We were what you could call ‘religiously conservative’ and had a common goal: toppling the regime. We had very scarce resources and showed our opposition mainly through graffiti on walls or small pamphlets we distributed covertly. After that, the jihad in Afghanistan was the second phase. The tight security grip of the regime in Libya was a ‘push factor’ that created an environment that one could not stay in. We did not have the space to move, let alone speak or express our opposition through any action. The pull factor was the Afghan cause (jihad) itself”.

The Libyans started to loosely organise themselves in the Pakistani city of Peshawar as of the late 1980s, drawing on the large number of Libyans already in Afghanistan and Pakistan who, having gained battlefield experience against the Soviets and their Afghan allies, now wanted to turn their attention to “pharaoh” Gaddafi. “We were young, angry and excitable. We went for armed struggle against the regime because we felt all the other doors were closed”, said Khalid al-Sharif, who later became deputy leader of the LIFG. “We had already seen how Gaddafi had dealt with more peaceful forms of opposition”.⁶

The Libyans were influenced by jihadist groups including the Egyptian al-Jihad group, which had a strong presence in Peshawar, and others then being formed by other veterans of the wars in Afghanistan. Sami al-Saadi, scion of a prominent Tripoli family and the group’s chief ideologue, outlined the nascent group’s ideology in an internal manifesto he authored. With his central premise that armed confrontation (jihad) was an individual

obligation (fard ‘ain) for every Muslim, as opposed to a collective or communal obligation (fard kifaya), Saadi argued that there were five key justifications for this stance: invasions by “infidels”; the “apostasy” of Muslim rulers; the military dominance and control of “apostate” rulers; the absence of the Caliphate; and the mistreatment of imprisoned Muslim dissidents.

Despite this, a number of senior LIFG figures have said they believed, in hindsight, that it was a mistake to name the group as they did – Al-Jama’a al-Islamiyyah al-Muqatilah – with the explicit reference to fighting. “In my view, we could have chosen a better name”, said Miftah al-Dawadi, who later served as the LIFG’s emir, in 2012.⁷ “We could have been the ‘Islamic Front for Change’ or something like that because the term *muqatilah*, or fighters, is so easily associated with terrorism by people in different parts of the world”. In 2019, Khalid al-Sharif expressed similar regrets but acknowledged the name was a product of its time. “The environment and experience in Afghanistan pushed us towards certain trends”.⁸ Al-Saadi concurred: “Maybe other groups were more clever than us and realised that the word *muqatilah* would ultimately be restrictive. It did not reflect the holistic goals we had in the long term”.⁹

The group adopted an organisational structure that comprised an emir or leader, a Shura Council, and a number of committees subordinate to the Shura Council, including a sharia committee tasked with religious guidance, a military committee, a media committee and an economic committee tasked with overseeing the LIFG’s financing.¹⁰ As the highest executive element of the LIFG, the Shura Council was responsible for all key decisions that were made through majority vote. The group designed a military structure for its activities in Libya in which they divided the country into three zones of operations: east, west and south.

From Nucleus to Fully-Fledged Group

Between 1990 and 1995, the nucleus that had formed in Afghanistan and Pakistan began to expand as the leadership built an organisation that was clandestine and paramilitary in nature. In the first years, the LIFG was able to recruit from the large community of battle-hardened Libyans – estimated at up to 1,000 – who were living in Afghanistan and in Pakistani border towns like Peshawar.

In 1993, the leadership of the fledgling LIFG moved to Sudan, where the Islamist government of Omar al-Bashir welcomed a range of foreign opposition groups and figures, many of whom had gained experience in Afghanistan, including Osama bin Laden. Other Libyans who relocated to Sudan included a number who would later become senior figures in al-Qaeda. The circles intermingled but the LIFG as a group remained separate, and most of its members left Sudan in the late 1990s after Gaddafi pressured Khartoum.

In 1998, bin Laden announced the formation of his “International Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders”. However, according to LIFG leaders and other non-Libyan militants, the LIFG refused to be part of it, insisting theirs was a Libyan battle only.¹¹ Former LIFG leaders and rank-and-file members assert that their agenda was always nationalist and focused on ousting Gaddafi.¹² The group did, however, make an ill-fated

foray into the early stages of the Algerian civil war that began in 1991, funnelling trained fighters from Afghanistan. It proved disastrous as the Libyans fell out with their Algerian counterparts over strategy and tactics. The LIFG later published two communiqués criticising the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA) for killing civilians and “deviating from the principles of jihad as well as those of the Sharia”. A number of LIFG figures cite lessons from the experience in Algeria – where a number of LIFG fighters were killed by their erstwhile allies – as key to their later rethinking of armed action.¹³

While the LIFG regarded itself first and foremost as a Libyan opposition group rooted in a Salafi-jihadist ideology, it did on occasion express solidarity with radical Islamists elsewhere. The writings of Sami al-Saadi, particularly his earlier work (which by his own admission was more radical), were cited by prominent figures within the wider jihadist sphere, including the influential Jordanian ideologue Muhammad al-Maqqadi.

The LIFG published communiqués on conflicts outside Libya, including in Palestine, and criticised what it called American aggression in Sudan and Afghanistan following the U.S. retaliatory attacks there after the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings by al-Qaeda.¹⁴ It condemned the U.S. for its 2003 invasion of Iraq and described the fight against the American occupation as “defensive jihad”.¹⁵

Although the LIFG swam in similar ideological waters to al-Qaeda, it did not condone the group’s broader strategy of targeting the West. Although one former LIFG member Abu Anas al-Libi was implicated in the planning of the blasts in Kenya and Tanzania, the group never publicly congratulated al-Qaeda on the bombings or other attacks such as the USS Cole bombings and the 11 September 2001 attacks.

According to the testimony of several former LIFG leaders, during 2000 – when many of them were again living in Afghanistan – they met with bin Laden to request that he stop using the country as a base from which to plan attacks against Western targets, arguing that he risked endangering their Taliban hosts, as subsequently happened with the U.S. bombing campaign in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks.¹⁶ A small circle of Libyans around Abu Laith al-Libi (who was killed in 2008 in the tribal areas of Pakistan) did ally itself with al-Qaeda, but this was a splinter move.

Despite claims by al-Qaeda deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Laith al-Libi in 2007 that the LIFG had joined its ranks,¹⁷ the group never joined bin Laden’s organisation – a Shura Council decision on the matter in 2000 was unanimous, according to several who were present – due to ideological differences but also to the belief that it would undermine their ability to pursue their primary goal of toppling Gaddafi.¹⁸

Emergence in Libya

Although the LIFG had been operating secretly in Libya between 1990 and 1995 – mostly building a clandestine network capable of taking on the Gaddafi regime militarily – it only declared its existence in late 1995 following clashes in Benghazi. That summer, the LIFG commander for eastern Libya, Saad al-Ferjani, oversaw an audacious and ultimately

successful operation to release an LIFG member who was being treated in a Benghazi hospital after he had been captured by security forces. Subsequent security sweeps across the city and its hinterland resulted in a number of armed confrontations between LIFG cadre and regime forces. The Gaddafi regime realised it had a new opponent and in October the LIFG announced itself with its first communique, in which it claimed responsibility for the clashes of the previous four months. Abdelhakim Belhaj, from Tripoli, became emir, a position he held for the remainder of the group's existence.

"The regime's security apparatus discovered that it was not just facing small Islamist groups as before, but rather a large organisational network (like an octopus) that was present across Libya", recalled Anis al-Sharif, an LIFG member from Derna who later issued communiques for the group from his home in London. "The regime also discovered the presence of LIFG leadership outside the country".¹⁹

Over the next three years, the LIFG tried to prove itself with several unsuccessful attempts to assassinate Gaddafi. The closest they came was in November 1996 when an LIFG operative hurled a grenade at Gaddafi during his visit to the desert town of Brak. "We saw the regime as a triangle. Kill Gaddafi and the whole regime will fall. The strategy was to target Gaddafi, people close to him and his security forces. We never targeted civilians", recalled one Shura Council member who joined in 1995.²⁰ In recounting their history, former members of the LIFG make a point of noting that they did not seek to target civilians or foreigners nor did they carry out bombings in public areas like jihadist groups in other countries such as Algeria and Egypt at the time.²¹

In a 2010 report, Amnesty International noted that Saif al-Islam Gaddafi claimed there had been civilian casualties during the LIFG insurgency of the 1990s, but he provided no statistics. Amnesty added that, according to its best knowledge, the LIFG did not target civilians.²²

The group conducted a campaign targeting security forces across eastern Libya but concentrated particularly around the town of Derna – home to several prominent LIFG members and other veterans of the war in Afghanistan, and the rugged Green Mountains area between it and Benghazi. In March 1996, several dozen Islamist detainees who had escaped from al-Kuwaifiya prison near Benghazi fled into the Green Mountains pursued by security forces who then came under attack by LIFG guerrillas. In June, LIFG fighters killed eight policemen at a training centre near Derna. In July, the government carried out massive arrests throughout the country and launched a major air and ground assault on LIFG mountain bases. Fierce fighting between the LIFG and regime forces in a remote valley west of Derna only ended when the LIFG found itself under aerial bombardment and facing thousands of soldiers deployed by Tripoli. The LIFG was forced to withdraw after sustaining heavy casualties.

The following year, Fath bin Sulaiman (alias Abu Abdulrahman al-Hattab), a founding member of the LIFG and a key commander in the group, was killed in a confrontation with regime forces in the Green Mountains where LIFG fighters were hiding out, sometimes in caves. Several others from the LIFG cadre were rounded up and jailed. Throughout this time, the LIFG failed to assassinate Gaddafi and suffered major losses. Its leaders also

wrestled with the fact it was unable to gain the same level of popular legitimacy that other groups elsewhere had, such as the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) during the initial stages of the Algerian civil war. In that case, the GIA was seen as an avenging force against a regime that had denied the population the Islamist government it had voted for. There was no such galvanising moment for the LIFG in the Libyan context: revelations regarding the Abu Salim prison massacre, for example, did not emerge until years after it took place. In June 1996, security officers at the high security Abu Salim prison killed some 1,200 inmates, many of them Islamists, after a revolt over poor conditions.²³ The first public acknowledgement of the incident came only in April 2004, when Muammar Gaddafi publicly stated that killings (in an unspecified number) had taken place in Abu Salim. Furthermore, regime tactics in the mid-late 1990s, such as cutting electricity and water supplies to towns suspected of harbouring LIFG members and rounding up scores of alleged sympathisers, helped undermine the group's local support network.

Within a few years of the LIFG going public, the Gaddafi regime had all but routed the group. Many of the LIFG cadre who had not been killed or jailed fled Libya. Some sought asylum in the UK, where many other Arab dissidents and veterans of the Afghan war were based, as well as in other European countries. Others moved to Istanbul. But a larger number returned to Afghanistan, one of the few places where Libyans lacking proper documentation could settle.

A First Revision

All of these events formed the backdrop to a meeting of the LIFG Shura Council in Istanbul in 1998 in which future strategies were discussed. Some members argued that their losses had been close to catastrophic but the Council did not move to suspend its operations in Libya. "What we suffered in the 1990s was essentially a defeat but some were in denial", recalled one member.²⁴ Abdelhakim Belhaj says he considers 1999 the year "where we officially started what I would call the 'revisions' process ... I personally proposed reassessing the strategy of using armed struggle against the regime in-country and its viability".²⁵

Two years later, at another Shura Council meeting – this time in Kabul – the group decided to halt all military activities in Libya for three years, at which time that decision would be reviewed. "We came to the conclusion that we could not continue as before", recalled one Shura Council member who was present. "The group was almost finished inside Libya. Our view was that, while we are freezing our operations there, if there is a chance to target Gaddafi and assassinate him, we will take it. Those of us outside Libya felt we needed to do more media work, highlight the repression of the Gaddafi regime, and put pressure that way".²⁶

The LIFG continued to recruit, however, and those volunteers continued to go to Afghanistan for training at a camp named after Salah al-Magrabi, an LIFG member killed in Libya in 1995.

Overall, the LIFG insurgency throughout the 1990s left 165 Libyan officials dead and another 159 wounded. More than 170 LIFG members were killed, including al-Hattab and four other Shura Council members, not including those who perished in the Abu Salim massacre.²⁷

Overview of State Approaches to the LIFG Before Negotiations

The Gaddafi regime's response to the challenge posed by the LIFG after it emerged in the 1990s was a predominantly military one. The counter-insurgency campaign against the LIFG was conducted by military officers, special forces and other elements of the security apparatus; and notably, it included aerial bombardment of LIFG targets in eastern Libya in 1996. The subsequent losses incurred by the LIFG were key to the initial rethinking of strategy among the group's leadership.²⁸ The Gaddafi regime's military campaign was accompanied by various forms of repression including imprisonment and ill-treatment. Even before the emergence of the LIFG, the Gaddafi regime had ruthlessly dealt with any opposition. Under the Libyan penal code, the death penalty could be imposed on "anyone who calls for the establishment of any association or party which is against the Revolution in purpose and means".²⁹ Dissidents of various political leanings were arbitrarily arrested and held for years without charge in prisons and other detention facilities, and often for long periods in incommunicado detention. Torture of those in custody was widespread and systematic. Family members of suspected regime opponents were harassed, threatened and often detained. Given the seriousness with which Gaddafi viewed the threat posed by the LIFG, such practices took on a particular ferocity when it came to the regime's crackdown on the group. The corpses of dead LIFG members were paraded publicly. The homes of families of LIFG members were demolished. Extended family members, friends, acquaintances and neighbours of LIFG suspects were monitored and subjected to intimidation and threats. Several key LIFG figures – among them Shura Council members Miftah al-Dawadi and Abdulwahab al-Qaid, both of whom were later involved in the revisions process – were jailed during the 1990s. Both men spent years in solitary confinement.

The mass killings at Abu Salim prison in 1996 had an extra impact on the LIFG and the wider Islamist milieu. Several LIFG members and the relatives of others – including a brother of Sami al-Saadi – were among the dead. "After the massacre, there was a sense something had to be done", said Mohamed Busidra, a non-aligned Islamist detainee at Abu Salim who was close to LIFG prisoners, including Dawadi, with whom he shared a cell between 1996 and 2000.³⁰ But Qaid, who was injured by a bullet fragment on the day of the massacre, said it did not prompt him to consider engaging with the regime: "We knew the regime was brutal; thus while the scale of the massacre surprised me, it didn't bring about a change in my mind. That came later for other reasons".³¹

Moving Toward Dialogue: Motivations of the Libyan Regime

While members of the LIFG had been engaging either in personal reflection or group debate regarding the feasibility of armed insurgency against the Gaddafi regime since the late 1990s, global shifts following the 11 September 2001 attacks and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, which in turn contributed to a tentative opening up in Libya, helped set the stage for the revisions process.

In 2003, Libya's international isolation came to an end when the UN lifted 11-year-old sanctions on the country and Gaddafi agreed to abandon all efforts to develop any chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. This boosted those considered reformists in Libya, including Gaddafi's son and heir apparent, Saif al-Islam. He focused on reconciling the regime with the country's opposition currents, engaging with figures from the Libyan branch of the Muslim Brotherhood – a process that led to the release of Brotherhood prisoners from Abu Salim and other detention centres – and the National Salvation Front, a group which had been involved in a number of coup attempts against Gaddafi. "Saif al-Islam came to the conclusion that unless a process of national reconciliation was ignited and the many elements opposed to his father's regime are involved so they have some kind of participation and end hostilities, the desired reform would not be possible or meaningful", recalled a former official who worked closely with the younger Gaddafi. "Thus he embarked on this process and became more convinced that it may well be even more useful once he had the support of Islamists".³²

Prison conditions started to improve as the regime began allowing international human rights organisations into Libya. As such, the LIFG's revisions process was part of a wider program of state reforms in Libya. "There were those within the regime who realised that it had to sacrifice and compromise on some things to ensure it could continue", said Akeel Hussin Akeel, a former higher education minister who proved key to initiating the dialogue with the LIFG.³³

After the United States rescinded Libya's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism in 2006, the Gaddafi regime began presenting itself as an ally not only willing to cooperate with the international community on counter-terrorism but uniquely positioned to provide intelligence on militants. Saif al-Islam was keen to demonstrate his reformist credentials and present a Libyan success story when it came to de-radicalisation. The Libyan regime was also worried about the emergence of a younger generation of militants, particularly in eastern Libya, who were drawn to a harder, more transnational, ideology than that espoused by the LIFG. Many of them flocked to Iraq to join al-Qaeda-linked insurgent groups after the 2003 invasion.³⁴

In July 2007, not long after tentative dialogue efforts between the LIFG leadership and the regime had begun, Libyan security forces disrupted a network in eastern Libya that was recruiting volunteers to fight in Algeria and Iraq and plotting bomb attacks against Libyan targets. More than 100 individuals were arrested.

Not everyone within the Gaddafi regime – particularly its security apparatus – was in favour of engaging in dialogue with the LIFG leadership. As one senior official involved in the process recalled: “The security apparatus and revolutionary committees (paralegal bodies formed in the 1970s ostensibly to “protect the revolution” that underpinned Gaddafi’s rule) were not ready to accept it. However, security officials – after some resistance – realised they had to be involved in the process. The revolutionary committees were against it but had no real means to obstruct it”.³⁵

The backing of Abdullah Senussi, Gaddafi’s long-time intelligence chief who favoured the idea of dialogue, was key to Saif al-Islam’s push. “This meant that the process went ahead despite some reservations and it also received some qualified support from elements within the external security apparatus led by Abuzeid Dorda...I think that Saif al-Islam was pinning great hopes on the success of the whole reconciliation process and insisted on it despite the obvious risks, the opposition from within the regime, and the lack of any guarantees that the Islamists would not resort to their old ways”.³⁶

Among those who endorsed the initiative, there was an acknowledgement that force alone would not resolve the challenge of homegrown militancy. Others grew to realise this as the dialogue continued. “There is no means to combat an ideology except through ideology”, declared Tuhami Khaled, a senior security official who had been sceptical of the revisions process, when it concluded in 2010.³⁷ Similarly, in a speech the same year, Saif al-Islam expressed hope that the resulting treatise would help address any new militancy challenge: “I advise a lot of young people, before they get ready to blow up oil installations in Libya or think of kidnapping tourists in Libya, or to join armed groups in Algeria and Mali, I advise them to read this book, and I also convey a message to other Libyan brothers who are now fighting in the mountains of Algeria and in the Malian desert, and tell them that you are in the wrong place”.³⁸

Motivations of the LIFG

Several LIFG leaders insist they considered dialogue with the Gaddafi regime only “after all other options were exhausted”.³⁹ But the fallout from the 11 September 2001 attacks in the U.S. was also a key factor, given the dramatic consequences for their group. The LIFG leadership realised that the so-called “war on terror” launched by the George W. Bush administration and pursued by the U.S. and its allies across the world meant not only the loss of Afghanistan as their “safe haven”; it also meant greater international scrutiny than before. “After 9/11, we understood that the world had changed as had the possibility of continuing the same campaign against the Gaddafi regime. The rules of the game had changed”, recalled Anis al-Sharif.⁴⁰

According to the LIFG leadership, they had repeatedly rebuffed bin Laden’s overtures and rejected offers to merge with al-Qaeda. Despite the defeats it experienced in the late 1990s in Libya, the group remained focused on its sole objective of overthrowing Gaddafi. In a 2005 interview, Noman Benotman, a former LIFG member who left the organisation in 2001 but contributed to the revisions process through his interaction with Saif al-Islam

Gaddafi, stated: “The LIFG has always been wholly focused on Libya. Our ultimate objective was the creation of an Islamic state in Libya”.⁴¹

While in Afghanistan, the LIFG leadership preferred to give their allegiance to their Taliban hosts. Sami al-Saadi gave a series of lectures in Afghanistan in which he advised other Arabs there to follow the law of the Taliban government rather than Bin Laden so long as they were living on their land.⁴²

LIFG leaders say they warned bin Laden that any attack launched on the U.S. from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan without the endorsement of Taliban leader Mullah Omar would be a violation of religious principles. Benotman later recounted these discussions in media articles, including an open letter he wrote to bin Laden.⁴³ When the U.S.-led bombing of Afghanistan began in late 2001, the LIFG ordered its cadre to leave the place they had known since the 1980s and where they had hoped to rebuild the group and train new recruits. They had no choice but to disperse beyond Afghanistan’s borders.

The LIFG’s post 9/11 flight from Afghanistan brought about the first contact between the group (or at least some of its rank-and-file and their families) and the Gaddafi regime. This transpired through Saif al-Islam Gaddafi’s NGO, the Gaddafi International Charity and Development Foundation. It coordinated with U.S. and Pakistani authorities to evacuate Libyan families from Afghanistan and repatriate them to Libya where they were assisted by the authorities. According to Libyan scholar and Islamist Ali Sallabi, later the primary mediator in the LIFG dialogue process, this gesture had an impact on perceptions of the Gaddafi regime among some of the group’s rank-and-file.⁴⁴

Senior LIFG figures, however, including several of the group’s leaders, ended up in a number of countries including Pakistan, Iran, Indonesia and China. Suspicion followed them. “Before 9/11 only Gaddafi targeted us but after 9/11 we were targeted by the whole world because the regime capitalised on the attacks to paint everyone as al-Qaeda”, said Sami al-Saadi.⁴⁵ Gaddafi’s rapprochement with the West meant the LIFG was now under greater surveillance, including in the UK. Several members were detained there. The group was also hit by augmented global efforts to disrupt the financing of militant groups, giving it further incentive to change tactics.

In March 2004, the LIFG’s emir Abdelhakim Belhaj, who had settled first in Malaysia after leaving Afghanistan before moving to China, was rendered back to Libya, along with his wife.⁴⁶ It later transpired that their rendition, and that of Sami al-Saadi and his family from Hong Kong the same month, was coordinated by the CIA, British intelligence (MI6) and the Gaddafi regime. Saadi noted that after his arrival in Tripoli, regime officials warned him there was no longer anywhere to hide. The head of external security, Musa Kusa, told him: “After September 11, I can pick up the phone and the CIA or MI6 would give us the latest information on you”.⁴⁷

Later in 2004, the U.S. State Department placed the LIFG on its list of terrorist groups. The UK followed suit the year after. The LIFG had already been included on the UN 1267 Committee Consolidated List of individuals and entities associated with al Qaida or the Taliban since October 2001.

Other senior LIFG members caught up in post 9/11 sweeps included Khalid al-Sharif who was arrested in Pakistan in April 2003 and transferred to the U.S.-run detention facilities in Afghanistan before he was rendered to Libya in 2005.

By the end of 2005, the majority of the LIFG's historically most important figures – its emir Abdelhakim Belhaj; its religious ideologue Sami al-Saadi; two of its military commanders Khalid al-Sharif and Mustafa Qanaifidh; former emir Miftah al-Dawadi; and Abdulwahab al-Qaid – were in prison in Libya.

Having spent many years in jail already, the worldview of Dawadi, Qanaifidh and Qaid had been shaped by very different experiences to those of Belhaj, Saadi and Sharif. “I spent seven years in solitary confinement where I felt I was just getting ready to die. I had no contact with the outside world”, said Qaid, who was imprisoned from 1995 to 2010. “Those outside could measure the regime's behaviour from a distance but also see what was happening internationally in terms of shifting political and ideological currents”.⁴⁸

Ali Sallabi, who was the key mediator in the dialogue process, observed the same:

“[They] were aware of the fundamental changes that took place in the global and regional arena and ... such events affected their thinking and made them reassess their priorities. It also gave them a newfound sense of developing ideas; unlike the people who had been in prison and had been cut off from the outside world since the 1990s. When these leaders interacted with their members inside the prison they were able to influence them. These dynamics helped them adopt the initiative”.⁴⁹

Although they approached it from varying perspectives borne out of starkly different personal experiences, all six men shared a sense that perhaps it was time to reassess the strategies and ideology that had underpinned the LIFG up to that point. “There were now several generations – older than me, the same age and younger – with me in the prison and that underscored for me the futility of armed struggle”, recalled Qaid.⁵⁰ With conditions at Abu Salim jail starting to improve after 2002 – though they deteriorated again in 2005 after tensions flared between inmates and guards – Qaid, Dawadi and Qanaifidh were able to sit together and debate what had gone wrong for the LIFG. Television sets were later installed in the prison, opening up the world outside for those who had been incarcerated for years.

Meanwhile, a conversation had already started between Belhaj and Saadi when they were both living in China in early 2004. They discussed the mood among the scattered LIFG cadre and wondered if the group was ripe for some sort of transition. “China was the ‘fighter's break’ as we say in Arabic. We had time to sit and reflect in a way that was impossible when we were constantly on the move and looking over our shoulder”, recalled Saadi. “That is where the root change in mentality began”.⁵¹

Between their rendition to Libya and the beginning of the dialogue with the regime, Belhaj, Saadi and Sharif were held in solitary confinement in Tajoura prison on the outskirts of Tripoli for a number of years before being transferred to Abu Salim. In Tajoura, all three

were interrogated by Libyan authorities but also personnel from several foreign security services, and subjected to beatings and other forms of ill-treatment.

For Khalid al-Sharif, that period and the preceding two years he spent in U.S.-run detention facilities in Afghanistan, gave him a deeper appreciation of what longer-term LIFG prisoners in Libya had experienced. “There had been a slow realisation over several years that armed opposition had only led to more suffering. The fact so many of our companions were between prison and death helped prompt our rethinking”.⁵²

The De-radicalisation Process

Some years earlier, when the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood was gradually opening a dialogue with the Gaddafi regime, a senior figure from the Brotherhood approached Akeel Hussin Akeel requesting that Ali Sallabi, a theologian and dissident close to the Brotherhood, be allowed return to Libya. Sallabi had spent much of the 1980s in Abu Salim prison during a period of repression that largely targeted the Brotherhood and the National Salvation Front. He then went into exile, first in Saudi Arabia, then Sudan, Yemen and finally Qatar.⁵³ Akeel was close to intelligence chief Abdullah Senussi (they are from the same tribe) and was able to start the process that led to Sallabi's return. "In 2004, Ali asked me what can we do to help the people in the prison", recalled Akeel. "I went to Abdullah Senussi to raise the subject. He was supportive from the beginning".⁵⁴

Sallabi had known several of the LIFG leaders from Saudi Arabia – which had been a transit point to Afghanistan for them – and Sudan. The Sallabi family had a history of opposition to the regime. Some of his relatives, including his brother Ismail, had been incarcerated in Abu Salim. "There were five keys to how the LIFG revisions process started", said Akeel. "Ali Sallabi opened the key with me, I opened the key with Abdullah Senussi, he opened the key with Saif al-Islam and Saif opened the final key with his father, Muammar Gaddafi. Without Senussi, none of this would have happened".

The LIFG engagement with the regime began tentatively in late 2005, following some exploratory meetings and one-on-one conversations between regime officials and individual LIFG figures in which the regime proposed the idea of the LIFG putting down arms. By early 2007, these six members of the Shura Council were involved in the talks which took on a more structured form the following year:

Abdelhakim Belhaj (Abu Abdullah)
Emir (1995-2010)

Sami al-Saadi (Abu al-Mundir)
Chief ideologue

Khalid al-Sharif (Abu Hazim)
Deputy emir

Mustafa Qanaifidh (Abu al-Zubair)
Head of the military committee; field commander

Miftah al-Dawadi (Abd al-Ghaffar)
Former emir

Abdulwahab al-Qaid (Abu Idris)
Field commander

Noman Benotman, the former LIFG member then based in London, was allowed to travel to Libya and consult with the imprisoned leadership. Benotman published an open letter to Ayman al-Zawahiri in late 2007, criticising al-Qaeda and calling for it to end all operations.⁵⁵ Benotman's relationship with his former associates was sometimes strained but he worked closely with Saif al-Islam.

Early in the process, Sallabi encouraged the LIFG leaders to examine the experiences of armed groups in other countries including Egypt, Yemen and Algeria and see which lessons could be applied to the Libyan context. A committee was formed which included the LIFG leadership, figures from the security apparatus and the Gaddafi Foundation. “It took time to generate confidence among them”, said Sallabi. “The next phase concerned psychological and emotional ‘release’, so that each party expressed its views and ideas and motives for the exit or motives for the use of counter-violence. The idea was that this would help calm all parties”.⁵⁶

As the process continued, the regime agreed to facilitate family visits to prison and pledged to improve conditions, including food and access to medical assistance, for the inmates. There were sessions – according to Sallabi more than 60 – where LIFG leaders debated with regime officials for hours. “There were open intellectual conversations about everything: Iraq, the U.S. occupation, Afghanistan, the Taliban, reform in Libya, the constitution, freedom of opinion and expression, state institutions, and even the issue of birth certificates for children born outside Libya were discussed”, said Sallabi.

The participants were allowed to meet in locations close to Abu Salim where they were provided with books – according to Sallabi more than 12,000 volumes – and other material to use as a foundation as they considered the revisions. The literature included works of classical jurisprudence. There were also more contemporary texts, among them those produced by leaders of the Egyptian militant Islamic Group who underwent a reassessment of their doctrine after declaring a ceasefire in 1997, and key figures within the al-Jihad Group including Sayyid Imam al-Sharif – known as Dr Fadl – who was then questioning the ideology underpinning it. Abdelhakim Belhaj has said he believes that literature represented a “guiding support” in the LIFG’s transition from armed opposition. But the process was painstaking.

“Drafting the revisions was not easy”, said Abdulwahab al-Qaid. “This was an ideology of more than 20 years that needed to be unpicked. It was not something you can do quickly or in a short brainstorming session”.⁵⁷ Key to the process was the ability of the imprisoned leadership to interact with their rank-and-file, both within Abu Salim jail and outside it. “Our mindsets were already ripe for [the revisions] but our fears were two-fold: one that the regime was not serious; and two that that mindset was not shared by other fighters in the prison”, recalled Khalid Sharif. “We needed to be able to discuss, debate and explain”.⁵⁸

Elements within Libya’s internal security, which had been sceptical of the process from the outset, including its director Tuhami Khaled, believed such interactions and communications posed a security threat. But their concerns were overruled when Saif al-Islam and Abdullah Senussi, head of Military Intelligence, approved them, agreeing with the LIFG leadership and Ali Sallabi that any decision to abandon armed opposition to the regime had to be a collective one or at the very least based on *ijma’ al-aghlabiya* (consensus of the majority). In 2007, a number of key LIFG members outside Libya, including three Shura Council members based in the UK, began participating through Sallabi. “We decided to support the process, but using pressure those who were in prison did not have”, said Abdulbaset Buhliqa, a Shura Council member who published a letter in al-Hayat newspaper

in June 2009 under the pseudonym Abdullah Mansour.⁵⁹ Using the title, “In defence of the Libyan Fighting Group in its new approach calling for reconciliation”, Buhliqa stressed the importance of “firm and sincere intention”.⁶⁰

The enduring scepticism of Libya’s internal security regarding the dialogue could also be seen in a disagreement in the latter stages of the process over whether the book produced by the LIFG outlining their revisions should be made public and when. Some officials felt publication of the 417-page “Corrective Studies” might bolster the LIFG’s credentials both domestically and internationally by demonstrating their theological nous. Again, those concerns were overruled by Saif al-Islam and Abdullah Senussi. Another dispute arose regarding the timing of publication after the LIFG insisted that it happen only after the release of its leadership, partly as an “insurance policy”, as one member put it. However, the LIFG ultimately agreed to publication before the leadership was released; hence the much-publicised press conference in March 2010, in which Saif al-Islam, flanked by Abdelhakim Belhaj, Sami al-Saadi and Khalid al-Sharif, announced their imminent release.

The Key Factors That Drove the Process

The Role of Leaders

In the years before the LIFG dialogue process began, officials from Libya’s internal security and religious establishment tried to replicate efforts in other countries such as Egypt whereby individual Islamist detainees were targeted for de-radicalisation or at least attempts to persuade them to abandon their opposition to the regime. The decision to engage with individuals and not groups was partly to do with the wish not to legitimise a group through recognition. Results were piecemeal at best – a small number of prisoners were released – but the LIFG, by far the largest single jihadist group in Libya, and the most cohesive, was not affected.

The LIFG would have to be engaged with as a group as represented by the six Shura Council members who were in Abu Salim. “The regime saw the LIFG as the main problem because it was a group and a large group at that”, said Khalid al-Sharif. “They believed that once the LIFG problem was solved, the rest would follow”.⁶¹

The role of the LIFG emir was key. “The revisions could not have happened without Abdelhakim Belhaj”, said Anis al-Sharif, a view shared by most of the LIFG from Shura Council level to rank-and-file.⁶² Belhaj had been emir of the LIFG since 1995, making him the longest serving emir in the group’s history. He commanded respect among the LIFG cadre because he had overseen the group during its most difficult periods, but also because of his personal experience, including his rendition to Libya. He was also seen as a unifying figure within the LIFG and was perceived as less dogmatic than other senior figures. “Belhai was more flexible”, recalled one regime official. “That made a big difference, given he was the emir”.⁶³

The role of Sami al-Saadi, the LIFG’s principal ideologue, was also key. He had written the group’s very first charter so the revisions were deeply personal for him. The breadth of Saadi’s theological knowledge was crucial when it came to drafting a revisions document

that could persuade any sceptical elements among the grassroots. In this regard, the insistence of Belhaj and the other imprisoned leaders that they interact with the rank-and-file so that any decision to abandon armed opposition would have the support of as much of the grassroots as possible was another key variable.

One of the greatest challenges faced by the LIFG leadership during the revisions process was the declaration by bin Laden's deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri in November 2007 that the LIFG had joined al-Qaida. The announcement came in two video clips produced by Al-Qaida's propaganda arm, Al-Sahab. The first clip featured Zawahiri and the second Abu Laith al-Libi (born Ali Ammar al-Ruqayy), a founding member of the LIFG who had previously sat on its Shura Council. According to several former LIFG leaders and members, Abu Laith was already considered to have distanced himself from the LIFG, though he was close to a rump faction mostly concentrated in the tribal areas of Pakistan which disapproved of the negotiations with the Gaddafi regime. Furthermore, he was acting unilaterally in making the declaration and did not have the authority to act or issue statements in the name of the group.⁶⁴ For these reasons, it failed to gain traction among the LIFG grassroots. It would, however, return to haunt the LIFG leadership in future when their political opponents in post-Gaddafi Libya used it against them.

Also critical to the dialogue process were those on the regime side who managed to overcome the objections of elements within the security apparatus, some of whose scepticism was rooted in personal experience of the campaign against the LIFG in eastern Libya in the 1990s. Saif al-Islam Gaddafi was able to assuage his father's reservations about the initiative and Abdullah Senussi helped build crucial support within the security services. "The relationship between Saif al-Islam and Senussi was very important", recalled Akeel Hussin Akeel.⁶⁵ Saif al-Islam assigned Salah Abdulsalam from the Gaddafi Foundation to be his main interlocutor in the dialogue. Abdulsalam, who regularly briefed diplomats including from the U.S. embassy on the process, was generally respected by the LIFG leadership. Ali Sallabi singled him out as one of the regime figures that contributed to the success of the dialogue. Sallabi also noted the constructive role of three Libyan intelligence officers: Salah al-Meshri, Sabri Hleyla and Mohamed al-Kilani. "As men of the security apparatus, their approach is usually one of caution, suspicion, and overall securitisation of this file", Sallabi said. "But they participated in the discussions and contributed to solving issues throughout the dialogue process, which was also a factor in its success".⁶⁶ According to Sallabi, also of note was the role of Khalifa Arhoma, director of Abu Salim prison, who had developed good relations with the LIFG leadership. "The dialogue needed an appropriate environment and atmosphere for it to succeed [and] Colonel Arhoma was the one who created that".

The Role of Mediators

Given the mutual suspicion and distrust between the LIFG leadership and the Gaddafi regime, the dialogue process that led to the group's revisions was likely to succeed or fail depending on the mediator. It had to be someone who had the trust of the LIFG leadership but also good relations with Saif al-Islam Gaddafi. Ali Sallabi, from a Benghazi family known to oppose the regime, had spent almost a decade in Abu Salim prison before

leaving Libya in the late 1980s. After a short stint in Afghanistan, where he met some of those who later formed the LIFG, he studied in Saudi Arabia – his fellow students included Libyans who went on to join the LIFG. He then lived in Sudan (at the same time the LIFG core was based there) and Yemen before settling in Qatar. He had known several of the LIFG leaders for more than two decades. The bonds between them, rooted in their similar histories of opposition and exile, meant there was a high level of trust.⁶⁷ Sallabi, who was close to the Muslim Brotherhood, had returned to Libya as the rapprochement between the Brotherhood and the regime developed. After gaining the trust of Saif al-Islam and other regime officials, Sallabi became a board member of the Gaddafi Foundation and was appointed “Islamic advisor” to the committee formed by Saif-al-Islam to develop a reformist constitution as part of his *Libya al-Ghad* program.

Sallabi’s personal relationships with both the LIFG leaders – he often referred to them, particularly Belhaj and Saadi, as friends – and senior regime officials proved key, as did his theological background which commanded respect from the LIFG cohort engaged in the revisions process.

Sallabi has argued that a key reason for the success of the dialogue was its Islamic/Islamist framework and the Gaddafi regime’s acceptance and recognition of that. “Imagine”, he said, “if the state did not recognise the Islamic reference (*marji ‘iyya*) of this dialogue ... the whole effort would have been futile”.⁶⁸

The Inside/Outside Prison Dynamic of the LIFG

Ali Sallabi was also able to open channels with prominent LIFG figures outside Libya – particularly the UK, its main base, where three other Shura Council members lived – in order to include them in the process. That correspondence began in 2007 and included LIFG figures whom Sallabi had studied with in Saudi Arabia such as Abdulbaset Buhliqa and Ismail Kamoka.⁶⁹ Sallabi also acted as an interlocutor with media as the revisions process developed. The LIFG made tactical use of the media at certain points during the process, publishing open letters in Arab media – al-Hayat was a favourite – in order to get their perspective across, particularly at times of strain in the dialogue. The engagement with the LIFG outside prison drew in members from several different countries apart from the UK, including Switzerland, Turkey, Morocco, Iran, and South Africa. There was concern among the overseas cohort that the imprisoned leaders were vulnerable because they were incarcerated. Initial scepticism and opposition to the process stemmed from the fact many within the grassroots had no faith in the regime.

“For many, changing the name and tactics of the group was one thing – and it had already been discussed internally since the late 1990s – but accommodation with the regime was something else”, recalled another member then based in the UK. “We outside made it clear that we would not give the regime a green light for nothing. There was a fear that the regime wanted to take everything and not give anything. We were tougher in our demands; it was a way to negotiate because we knew those inside were restricted because they were in prison”.⁷⁰

Reflecting this, the LIFG overseas continued to recruit up to late 2008 and early 2009. “Some of us were expecting a split”, said Buhliqa. “We were aware of the Irish experience in 1998 (where dissident republicans who rejected Sinn Féin’s and the IRA’s endorsement of the Belfast Agreement ending the conflict formed their own splinter groups). If we had just 50 people who rejected it, they could cause a big problem”.⁷¹

Eventually, the approximately 30 LIFG members living in the UK decided to back the process. They included not only Shura Council members but also twelve individuals once subject to British government “control orders” restricting their movement and communications because they were deemed to pose a threat to national security. Senior figures met with British intelligence in 2007 to inform them of their positions on the dialogue.⁷² A year later, the UK announced the designation of three prominent LIFG members including Buhliqa. “We suspected the impetus for this came from the Gaddafi regime and may have been a negotiating tactic for the process back in Libya”, Buhliqa recalled. “It seemed their strategy was to go hard on the people who were outside Libya and softer with those inside prison because they were under their control”.

Nevertheless, a number of LIFG members based in the UK had their control orders dropped after the dialogue process gathered momentum in Tripoli; several more had orders dropped against them after the revisions were published.⁷³ British security services distributed copies of the revisions to these latter individuals because of their lack of access to the internet.

Trust Building Between the LIFG and the Regime

Breaking down the high level of suspicion between the LIFG leadership and the Gaddafi regime took time. Although a certain degree of trust was forged in order for the process to continue as it did, for the LIFG leaders the question of how much the regime could really be trusted always remained, even after the release of Abdulhakin Belhaj, Khalid al-Sharif and Sami al-Saadi in March 2010. Qaid and Dawadi were not released until 2011 which, for some of the LIFG cadre, confirmed their suspicions that the regime would not act in good faith.

“If we hadn’t had these trust issues, the process would have taken months, not years”, said Khalid al-Sharif. “We always had a question in the back of our minds whether the regime wanted this to be a true dialogue with benefits for both sides or just something to benefit them as a PR stunt”.⁷⁴

For Sami al-Saadi, having lost relatives in the Abu Salim prison massacre, the trust issue was particularly acute. “At one of the early meetings, we asked them, how can we trust you?” he recalled. “Sabri Hleyla (one of the three senior intelligence officers involved in the process) replied, ‘There’s only our word to trust’”.⁷⁵

During the preliminary stages of the dialogue process, a number of confidence-building measures were taken. Visits from relatives were permitted and detainees were allowed to sit alone with their families. Efforts were made to improve conditions in the prison, particularly in terms of better food and medical assistance, but also to allow for more interaction

between inmates. Regular sessions took place with regime officials to discuss issues of contention, including what had happened in Iraq and Afghanistan but also domestic matters such as the question of reforming the Libyan state, preparing a constitution and freedom of speech. According to Ali Sallabi, it was important that the root causes behind the detainees' decision to take up arms against the Gaddafi regime were addressed given that most of the LIFG cadre insisted they had done so only because there were no other ways to express criticism of the regime.⁷⁶

The first objective of these discussions was to secure agreement from the detainees that they would abandon their violent opposition to the regime; the second was that they would condemn the use of armed insurgency against the regime. Sallabi believed that "bonds were built" between the various participants in the dialogue – the detainees, the security officials and clerics like himself – which allowed a "synchronicity" that fostered an ultimately successful outcome.⁷⁷ But there were points in the process when relations became strained between the LIFG leadership and their regime interlocutors, at times threatening a complete breakdown. Sami al-Saadi recalls one meeting in 2009 when Salah Abdulsalam of the Gaddafi Foundation presented a document for them to sign. The text lauded the Gaddafi regime and also included a declaration of loyalty to it. The LIFG leaders present refused to sign. Miftah al-Dawadi said, "I've been in prison for almost twenty years, I have no problem staying here for another twenty but I won't go against what I consider a basic principle".⁷⁸

The Role of Incentives

When the dialogue process began, the LIFG as a group was at the weakest point in its history. Given this, and the fact that its leadership was mostly imprisoned, the primary challenge for the LIFG was how to negotiate an agreement with a still-hated regime while ensuring a minimum loss of face. The incentives the Gaddafi regime could offer, the most important of which was the promise of release, were therefore key. However, the episode in early 2009 in which LIFG leaders refused to sign a statement declaring their loyalty to the regime shows there were lines they were not prepared to cross. In January 2010, Norman Benotman referred to this at an event in London: "The [revisions] were not just written because they wanted to be released from prison – they had been offered (and rejected) this opportunity before".⁷⁹

Yet the dialogue continued, driven largely by the prospect of release from prison. This also helped persuade sceptics within the LIFG grassroots overseas. "There were many debates and some hardliners were against the dialogue and revisions in theory. But they decided to go along with it for the sake of securing releases for those incarcerated", recalled Anis al-Sharif. "The feeling was, let's give it a chance if it will end the misery of our people in prison".⁸⁰

In the meantime, there were incremental and immediate inducements – including the mentioned improvements in prison conditions – aimed at strengthening the hand of the LIFG leadership so they could win over their co-imprisoned rank-and-file to the idea of dialogue and eventually renunciation of armed opposition. To a large extent, this approach

was inspired by the Egyptian process in the case of the imprisoned Islamic Group earlier that decade.⁸¹

But while the regime made use of such inducements, it also deployed threats. Sami al-Saadi recalled Tuhami Khaled, one of the dialogue sceptics within the security apparatus, saying: “It’s up to you. If you don’t do this, there are court cases”. According to Khalid al-Sharif, “There was always in the background this sense of ‘if you don’t like it, we have a trial for you’”. In point of fact, several of the LIFG leaders were tried, convicted and sentenced between 2008 and 2009, long after the dialogue process had started. For example, Abdelhakim Belhaj was tried and sentenced to death in 2008 for crimes against the state. Although he had a state-appointed lawyer, he was never given a chance to meet with him, there were no witnesses at the trial, and the only evidence taken into consideration was a report from Libyan security services. The same year, Khalid al-Sharif was convicted of attempting to overthrow the regime, and sentenced to death by firing squad. In 2009, Sami al-Saadi was charged with 14 crimes, including attempting to overthrow the government and spreading ideology against Muammar Gaddafi’s 1969 revolution. He too was convicted and sentenced to death.⁸²

Apart from inducements offered during the years of dialogue in order to push the process forward, there were also those aimed at ensuring the reintegration of released prisoners went smoothly. Officials at the Gaddafi Foundation, in particular, were keen to impress international interlocutors with an approach they sometimes portrayed as “transitional justice” – offering financial compensation, restitution of legal and property rights (the latter being of particular importance given how the regime often confiscated or demolished property as a means of social control) and assistance with finding employment and housing. These officials of the Foundation – in comparison to those within the security apparatus – showed a better understanding of how Libya’s domestic reforms could be affected by the extent to which the former prisoners could be rehabilitated and reintegrated into Libyan society.

In March 2010, the regime released 214 LIFG members, suspects (some had been imprisoned due to association or blood ties with members of the LIFG or other groups) and other former militants. Upon release, they were given an initial “loan” of 10,000 Libyan dinars to help them resettle, an amount described as “very handsome financial compensation” by one regime official involved in the process.⁸³ The Gaddafi Foundation remained in contact with those released through local administrative authorities (*lajnaat al-shabiya*) and the security services continued to monitor the former detainees to ensure they have “become citizens again and have peaceful ideas”.⁸⁴ They were nevertheless forbidden to take part in any activity considered political.

Reintegration proved challenging in many cases. Former detainees suffered from delays in compensation payments or difficulties in finding employment.⁸⁵ When Khalid al-Sharif got a job at a construction company in Tripoli but was sacked just a month later, he believed it was due to pressure from security officials.⁸⁶ In other cases, former detainees attempted to return to their previous jobs but employers often refused to accept them, citing an earlier order from Libya’s internal security that anyone suspected of being a dissident be fired.⁸⁷

Symbolic incentives were another dimension under consideration as part of the reintegration process. For example, some officials – including Saif al-Islam Gaddafi – expressed an intention to investigate past crimes of the regime, the Abu Salim prison massacre being the most prominent. Eventually, compensation was offered to the families of the Abu Salim victims – which included a number of LIFG members – but a majority rejected it. At one point, Saif al-Islam publicly stated he wanted to demolish the prison at Abu Salim or turn it into a civic facility.⁸⁸

The Influence of Transitional Justice on the Process

The LIFG revisions process occurred against a background of tentative changes within the Libyan regime, largely driven by Saif al-Islam Gaddafi. In 2003, he established the Gaddafi International Charity and Development Foundation, which included a human rights society. The foundation raised awareness about human rights violations, launched a campaign against torture and called for more freedom of expression and association. Saif al-Islam and the foundation were also key to opening up a public conversation on the Abu Salim prison massacre, which the regime had long been silent about, only publicly acknowledging it had taken place in 2004. In a 2008 speech, “Libya: Truth for All”, Saif al-Islam highlighted the importance of bringing the Abu Salim “incident” to light, calling it “the biggest and most tragic problem and incontestably very, very painful”.⁸⁹

The foundation’s handling of the Abu Salim matter – acknowledging the deaths, informing the families of the victims, and offering financial compensation to some – showed that some notion of transitional justice appeared to inform the decisions of Saif al-Islam and his colleagues. In conversations with foreigners, officials from the foundation sometimes framed the LIFG revisions process using the language of transitional justice, particularly in discussions with diplomats. Others who engaged with senior regime officials detected little awareness of transitional justice. “I didn’t ever encounter a whiff of transitional justice”, said one researcher who visited Libya during this period. “It wasn’t an operative framework for them at the time”.⁹⁰

In 2009, two international human rights organisations, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, were permitted rare and highly restricted visits to Abu Salim prison. These were facilitated by the Gaddafi Foundation. In April 2009, when Human Rights Watch researchers visited, they spoke with a number of LIFG prisoners including Belhaj; but there was no mention of the revisions process either by the inmates or regime officials. When Amnesty International visited Abu Salim the following month, its researchers noted in a subsequent report that “it was clear... [the visit] came at a sensitive time”; and Belhaj refused to be interviewed. Between the two visits, another prisoner, Mohamed Abdelaziz al-Fakheri (known as Ibn al-Sheikh al-Libi), had been found dead in his cell in what the regime said was a suicide. He was another Libyan veteran of Afghanistan and helped run the Khaldan training camp there from 1995 to 2000 before he was captured by the U.S. and subjected to rendition.⁹¹ A CNN report that November cited sources familiar with the talks saying Saif al-Islam was worried that al-Fakheri’s death, which some prisoners considered suspicious, could jeopardise the LIFG revisions process.⁹²

Saif al-Islam and the small group of regime officials working on the revisions were a minority within a regime where security-driven ideas prevailed in terms of how to deal with the threat from militants, including the LIFG. More profound change – particularly reform of the power structures that had been created in the early decades of the Gaddafi era to ensure the survival of his regime – remained elusive. That fact was not lost on either the LIFG leadership or the Abu Salim families, many of whom continued to press for accountability and not merely financial compensation. In 2009, those families published a list of demands including the prosecution of those responsible for the prison massacre. Two years later, their clamour for justice would spark the anti-regime protests in Benghazi that later tipped into an armed uprising that resulted in the ousting of Gaddafi.

While Saif al-Islam and his team were instrumental in making the LIFG revisions process happen, Ali Sallabi was, in many respects, its architect. As mediator, Sallabi's sense of transitional justice was rooted in his religious faith and he shaped the revisions process accordingly, drawing on notions of compromise and reconciliation through a faith-based approach he knew would resonate with the prisoners. But neither he nor the LIFG leaders participating in the revisions appear to have been aware of transitional justice concepts and processes from elsewhere, other than the literature available to them on the similar dialogues in Egypt and Yemen.

Ultimately, the offers of post-release financial compensation, restitution of legal and property rights, and assistance with finding employment and accommodation were not fully honoured by the Gaddafi regime. This reflected the political limitations of the space Saif al-Islam and his team worked in, as far as transitional justice was concerned.

The Revisions

The Content of the Revisions

In August 2009, the LIFG published the revisions with the title: “Corrective Studies of the Concepts of Jihad, Accountability and the Judgment of People” (*al-kitab al-dirasat al-tashihiyya*). The text is divided into nine chapters, each with sections and sub-headings.

In their recantation of the concept of “armed opposition to a said ruler”, the LIFG make arguments that utilise examples from Islamic history as well as modern-day experiences, including the LIFG’s very own. The authors explain at length the transformative process that led them to redefine key terms and revise their stance on the concept of jihad, particularly with reference to bringing about political change through violent means.

By way of summary, the preface of the revisions emphasises the fact that the beliefs outlined by the authors are the result of lessons learnt and informed by their shared experience of armed struggle over the years. The LIFG leaders state that the revisions may appear to run counter to previous writings or views that they may have publicly shared; however, they also stress the notion of *ijtihad* (contextualisation) to explain their change in conviction.⁹³ While the notion of adapting jurisprudential decisions to modern-day developments is stressed throughout the revisions, the first four chapters are heavily focused on defining traditional Islamic precepts and elucidating the meaning behind them. This provides a theoretical grounding that informs the central fifth chapter of the revisions, which focuses on the concept of jihad and violent armed struggle aimed at inducing political change; as well as subsequent chapters, which focus less on how to deal with discord in a society with dialogue and etiquette.

The first chapter of the revisions is general in scope and focuses on the “Islamic contract” and conditions for one to be considered a Muslim. It aims to define the link between Islam and spirituality, emphasising co-existence and the fact that the conditions for one to be considered a Muslim are – by and large – based on intent and should not be judged by others. This helps frame the subsequent chapters but also indirectly touches on the notion of *takfir*,⁹⁴ which is a concept utilised by several jihadist groups. The chapter’s emphasis on pluralism in the contemporary world – coupled with definitions that highlight the sanctity of the “Islamic contract” – is meant to highlight that lack of knowledge on these basic issues may lead well-intended believers into violating others’ dignity or viewing killing as lawful.

The second chapter emphasises the importance of bridging theory and practice in Islamic jurisprudence. It outlines the importance of respecting Islamic scholars, but stresses that

scholars should not be followed if they are deemed to have been wrong on key issues. The chapter specifies that only Islamic scholars of a certain stature are allowed to critique other scholars, provided the former respect certain ethics in the way they point out the latter's mistakes. The authors note: "We mention that many of the calamities besetting Muslims today have arisen on account of ignorance and the issuing of decisions, without jurisprudential qualifications on matters of great importance, especially those having to do with blood and money".⁹⁵

The third chapter focuses on the importance of *daw'ah* (preaching). In it, the authors apply their ethics of criticism to highlight how some scholars often omit that the use of dialogue to proselytise or to bring about change in society is much more desirable than violence.

The fourth chapter is the most important one of the revisions as it discusses the notion of jihad, its definition according to Islamic jurisprudence, and its merits in light of contemporary reality. The authors detail the ethical requirements, regulations and etiquette (*adab*) of jihad – among them, caring for prisoners of war and forbidding any desecration of the dead – noting the "disastrous consequences of deviating from these regulations".⁹⁶ It also argues that "the reduction of jihad to fighting with the sword is an error and shortcoming".⁹⁷

The chapter declares that jihad is *fard kifaya* (a collective or communal obligation) and that, if carried out by a sufficient amount of people, ceases to be obligatory for the rest. This was a clear refutation of the premise Sami al-Saadi laid out in the early years of the LIFG, when he stated in the group's manifesto that jihad was an individual obligation (*fard 'ain*) for every Muslim, as opposed to a collective one. Al Qaeda and other jihadist groups also hold that jihad is *fard 'ain*.

Saadi had argued in the early 1990s that there were five key justifications for this position: invasions by "infidels"; the "apostasy" of Muslim rulers; the military dominance and control of "apostate" rulers; the absence of the caliphate; and the mistreatment of imprisoned Muslim dissidents.

The revisions also make clear the LIFG's position on the targeting of civilians, noting "it is forbidden to kill women, children, elderly people, priests, messengers, traders and the like".⁹⁸ More generally, the authors focus on reasons why the use of violence to bring about change in Muslim countries or to reform a particular society is not permissible.

The fifth chapter builds on the LIFG's conceptualisation of jihad and focuses on the theological ethics of disagreement, an argument which allows the authors to posit that disagreements cannot be resolved through violence. Subsequent chapters focus on more spiritual issues, highlighting how these relate to jihad and the ethics of disagreement outlined in the fourth and fifth chapters. In particular, authors outline how perceptions of good and evil – while being important – do not justify resorting to violence.

Multiple legal texts and fatwas by Islamic scholars are put forward, in order to highlight that revolting against rulers is prohibited. The authors state that it is generally agreed by Islamic scholars that this path only has negative consequences. Instead, "patience, advocacy and dialogue" are considered the appropriate methods to introduce change in a society.

The fourth chapter on jihad ends with a statement to the effect that a government can use violence to fight evil, but it is impermissible for society to take up arms to pursue reform or fight a perceived evil. This assertion, in particular, was held up by LIFG critics as proof that their participation in the 2011 uprising against Gaddafi constituted a reversal of their previous stance.

When the revisions were made public, several commentators highlighted one particular section in the chapter on jihad. It argues that jihad was an obligation when “non-believers invade a Muslim country” adding that “it is upon the people of that country to push back the enemies and expel them from their land, and if they are unable to do so, it is upon the people who neighbour them”.⁹⁹ It goes on to list “Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan” as “among the places of jihad today”.

Asked about this by a journalist at the time, Ali Sallabi defended the argument: “Violence against occupation is a sacred act ... It is a sacred jihad”. The then U.S. ambassador to Libya, Gene Cretz, expressed concern. “I don’t know how you parse jihad”, he said. “If it means that, ‘If you don’t do it in Libya, you are free to go and do it elsewhere,’ that would be a little troubling to us”.¹⁰⁰

The LIFG leadership made a deliberate decision not to mention al-Qaeda or any other group by name in the revisions document, presumably judging that explicit criticism might complicate efforts to engage with and persuade younger militants.

Initial Reactions to the Revisions

After the LIFG revisions were published, those within the Gaddafi regime who backed the process were keen to present the group’s recantations as a major success, one that would have an impact far beyond Libya’s borders. U.S. diplomats in Tripoli reported that the Libyan government was touting the process as a “revolutionary new method to combat terrorism and the influence of Al Qaeda in the region”.¹⁰¹ However, a U.S. diplomatic cable later published by WikiLeaks was more cautious in its assessment:

While local and international opinions are still being formulated on the initiative, the LIFG’s renouncement of violent jihad and extremist ideology, and the document’s direct challenge to Al Qaeda, represents a significant achievement for Saif al-Islam in particular and the Libyan government as a whole. The primary motivation for Muammar al-Qadhafi’s backing of the initiative was undoubtedly regime security, and for Saif al-Islam, it may also have been political, designed to shore up his credentials both at home and abroad.

The [Libyan Government’s] immediate payoff on this investment is significant: the elimination of one of Qadhafi’s most staunch opposition groups and a high-profile public relations coup in Libya’s ongoing quest to position itself as a leader in the Islamic world. However, the long-term effects of the initiative, particularly with respect to the ideology of jihad and global counter-radicalization efforts, remains to be seen.¹⁰²

Though Libya remained a country where access for journalists and researchers was restricted, foreign media and academics were invited there to learn about the revisions process when it concluded. They could interview LIFG members and attend press conferences showcasing the initiative, particularly Saif al-Islam's role in making it happen. CNN broadcast a lengthy feature from Tripoli, including footage from inside Abu Salim, declaring that "In essence the new code for jihad is exactly what the West has been waiting for: a credible challenge from within jihadist ranks to Al Qaeda's ideology".¹⁰³ According to media reports at the time, Saudi Arabia had offered to translate the document into sixteen languages.

Ali Sallabi was keen to highlight the fact that the LIFG revisions were endorsed by a number of prominent religious scholars, several of whom were influential in jihadist and wider Islamist circles, including Saudi cleric Salman al-Ouda (who also met with the LIFG leaders in Tripoli during the process) and Yusuf al-Qaradawi (the Qatar-based Egyptian cleric with links to the Muslim Brotherhood).¹⁰⁴ Both Ouda and Qaradawi were close associates of Sallabi. Among the Libyan scholars who gave it a positive review was Sadiq al-Gheriani, who was appointed Grand Mufti of Libya after the fall of Gaddafi.¹⁰⁵

Such endorsements were key to counter sceptics who viewed the LIFG revisions – as with similar recantations authored by their Egyptian peers – with suspicion because they were drafted in prison.¹⁰⁶ Among the prominent figures who criticised the process on that basis were Ali Belhaj, former leader of the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), and Hani al-Sibai, a London-based Egyptian militant who argued the LIFG revisions had been produced in "the kitchens of tyrants".¹⁰⁷

Such criticisms fuelled heated debate on jihadist web forums as the LIFG recantations were dissected by former associates and others. Abdulwahab al-Qaid recalled: "Our critics interpreted the whole thing – the process and the document we produced – as a coercion by the regime. They were not aware of how many of us had been rethinking our strategy for years".¹⁰⁸

Saif al-Islam Gaddafi was keen to publicise the revisions not just internationally, but also inside Libya. They were published as a nine-part series in Oea, a newspaper close to him, and also appeared on its website. One former Libyan official noted that while Saif al-Islam and his circle held up the revisions process as a success, others within the regime remained sceptical:

"Despite the assurances [of the LIFG leaders] that they reached the convictions outlined in the revisions on their own and after consultations amongst their rank-and-file as well as from respected religious scholars, few seemed ready to accept their claims. They were in prison and many of them were sentenced to death. They had seen how others had perished in jail or had been executed. This must have been instrumental in leading them to adopt the revisions".¹⁰⁹

Al-Qaeda did not officially comment on the LIFG revisions, despite having commented on the earlier recantation by Egyptian jihadists. Some LIFG members believed this was because the al-Qaeda leadership – which at that point included a number of Libyans, some of them former LIFG, at senior level – did not want to draw more attention to a document

challenging their ideology.¹¹⁰ Security concerns may also have been a factor, given that drone surveillance at that time meant senior al-Qaeda figures were constantly monitored. According to Qaid, his younger brother Abu Yahya al-Libi – a former LIFG member who left to join al-Qaeda and later became its chief propagandist – did not make contact to give his views.¹¹¹

Authorities in Algeria, Mauritania and Morocco incorporated the LIFG revisions into their own efforts at de-radicalisation, distributing copies both inside and outside prisons. Given the significant number of Libyans who had joined al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the preceding years, the government of Algeria – where AQIM was concentrated – hoped the revisions could stem the flow of Libyan recruits. When the LIFG revisions were circulated in Morocco, Mohamed Abdel Wahab Rafiki (also known as Abu Hafs), the leader of a Moroccan jihadist group, endorsed the text and called on the Moroccan authorities to launch a similar process.

Promises Betrayed

On 23 March 2010, a total of 214 detainees were released from Abu Salim prison. International and local media were allowed to film their release along with accompanying speeches made by Saif al-Islam Gaddafi and other officials. In his speech, Saif al-Islam hailed what he said was an “important day” and specified that among the 214 released were 34 members of the LIFG, including Abdelhakim Belhaj, Sami al-Saadi and Khalid al-Sharif, but not the other three figures who signed the revisions. The others comprised “100 individuals linked directly to the file of groups in Iraq” and “80 individuals who also have links to jihadist cells at home and who were acquitted but whose release was delayed for several reasons”.¹¹²

According to Saif al-Islam, that brought the number released to 705 people and those who remained in prison totalled 409. He added that some 232 of those were “targeted for release” and “as soon as we make sure that these individuals no longer pose a danger to society, and that they are ready for integration into the community, there will be no problem to set them free, and therefore the process will continue until the release of the last prisoner”.¹¹³

Christopher Boucek, an American researcher who studied de-radicalisation and rehabilitation programs in Yemen and Saudi Arabia and was in Tripoli to witness the release of the prisoners in March 2010, was struck by the ad hoc nature of the process:

Libyan authorities were unable to answer many questions about how the program was designed to work. They were incapable of providing details about what metrics were used to determine when detainees would be released or what instructions were offered in prison prior to release. And they would not offer any information about post-release support and monitoring. It quickly became apparent that the Libyans were not deliberately withholding answers, but simply didn't have answers because their program did not address any of these points. This was not rehabilitation or disengagement. It was pragmatic demobilization All of the detainees were freshly

dressed in new clothes provided for the occasion, but few seemed to realize they were truly free and would soon be rejoining their families. Some detainees had to walk home from Abu Salim as their families were not even notified of their release. One released militant observed that if they could not get rides home, how would the regime manage to provide for them once they were freed? It was a remarkable and chaotic scene. There was no intermediate step between detention and release, no reintegration process, and no program to facilitate their return to society. The doors of the notorious prison were just thrown open. This was not rehabilitation or reintegration, but the emptying of a prison. In the absence of a post-release support program, there is no way to do the follow-up monitoring necessary and encourage continued disengagement from terrorism.¹¹⁴

LIFG Shura Council members Dawadi, Qaid and Qanaifidh remained in Abu Salim that day even though they had been key to the drafting of the revisions and constituted half of the six signatories. Nevertheless, Saif al-Islam claimed, “the greatest importance lies in the release of [the LIFG’s] leaders,” and he insisted, “today we have reached the crest of the reconciliation and dialogue program”.¹¹⁵

That was not how the LIFG saw it. “They released us as they promised but they kept the others in prison. I was embarrassed and pained”, recalled Sami al-Saadi. “It was a strategy by the regime, using the fact the others were still inside in order to pressure us on the outside”.¹¹⁶

A shift in the Gaddafi regime’s internal dynamics at the time had also affected the process. The cohort around Saif al-Islam was being challenged by others within the regime. Those tensions could be felt on the day of the press conference announcing the prisoners’ release. Senior security official Tuhami Khaled, for example, referred to the LIFG revisions as “repentance from heresy” as opposed to reconciliation.¹¹⁷

“Those who were sceptical of Saif al-Islam were putting obstacles in the path of a full release”, said one LIFG member. “When we objected to the proposal to release only half, they said ‘we decide who gets released, it’s not up to you’. The conclusion among us was that it was better to have something instead of nothing and this was the first step. There was also a concern that if we put too many conditions to the regime, they might close down the whole negotiation process”.¹¹⁸

But as frustrations grew in late 2010, LIFG members outside Libya issued a number of statements raising concerns about those who remained in prison. This angered officials within the Libyan security apparatus and Belhaj was summoned to explain. According to a UK-based LIFG member who drafted the third and most important statement:

“We called on the regime to release the remaining detainees and warned them that the way they have been corrupting their promises could affect a new generation. We said we had been prepared to commit to the negotiations and their outcome but if we believe the regime is trying to play a game then we are free to resume our opposition, though not by taking up arms again”.¹¹⁹

Despite these efforts to pressure for their release, Dawadi, Qaid, Qanaifidh and some 50 more men from the LIFG rank-and-file would have to wait until 16 February 2011 when they – along with 150 other prisoners – were allowed leave Abu Salim jail just as protests against the Gaddafi regime, particularly in eastern Libya, were gathering momentum. “At the time, officials were hesitant about releasing us”, recalled Dawadi. “Some were very opposed, and argued about whether our release would calm things down or worsen the situation if we joined the revolution”.¹²⁰

Reneging for Revolution?

Former LIFG member Noman Benotman has argued that the timing of Libya's 2011 uprising – which was inspired by the ousting of autocrats in neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt – was very fortuitous for the group:

“Firstly, the revolt occurred when all of the LIFG’s members were out of prison and available to take up arms – as well as freeing the group to act without fearing reprisals against their imprisoned colleagues. Secondly, due to the reconciliation program, the organization and its leaders were known to the Libyan people, and the group had begun reestablishing its old organization and communication networks both in Libya and abroad. Thirdly, the LIFG refutations, widely publicized on media outlets such as CNN, had succeeded in finally disassociating the LIFG from al-Qaeda and particularly from al-Qaeda’s vision of global jihad”.¹²¹

Soon after he was released from Abu Salim, Dawadi left for Tunisia where he connected with others then joining the gathering uprising which would later draw in a UN-mandated NATO-led intervention. Qaid, Saadi, Belhaj and Khalid al-Sharif were summoned by regime officials, including Saif al-Islam Gaddafi and Abdullah Senussi, who demanded they denounce the anti-regime protests. They declined. Days later, Saadi and Sharif were detained again and held in Abu Salim until rebel forces entered Tripoli in August. “The regime broke its word when they put Sami and I back in prison”, said Sharif. “When they realized they could not use us against the revolution, they decided to blame us for it”.¹²²

Belhaj managed to avoid arrest and escaped to Tunisia where he joined Dawadi. Both men ended up coordinating with various elements of the Libyan opposition (both political and armed) and internationals including the Qataris who supported the military intervention. Ali Sallabi was an important interlocutor for Qatar during the 2011 uprising. His personal relationships with the LIFG leaders, which pre-existed the revisions process but were deepened as a result of it, proved key to the role its former members played that year. As Sallabi himself observed: “The prison and reconciliation efforts created a very secure, trusted and strong relationship between [those who participated]. There were Abu Salim prisoners in all Libyan cities. They had very close bonds based on trust. It was a hard network to penetrate”.¹²³

Abdulwahab al-Qaid fled southwards to Sudan, travelling from there to Benghazi where the Libyan opposition was headquartered. Other released LIFG members dispersed to their hometowns across Libya where they joined with the ad hoc rebel forces. Earlier in February, senior LIFG figures in the UK – chiefly Abdulbaset Buhliqa and Anis al-Sharif – had announced the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change (LIMC), a public relaunch of the

LIFG designed to chime with the calls for protest back in Libya. The LIMC issued statements supporting Libyan calls for foreign intervention, noting in one that it was “aware of the sensitivity of this call and the desire of our people not to see any foreign interference on Libyan soil”.¹²⁴

A key episode in the former LIFG’s participation in the uprising against Gaddafi was the founding of the Omar al-Mukhtar brigade in eastern Libya in March 2011. Among those who formed it were Buhliqa and Abdulmonem al-Madhuni, an LIFG Shura Council member known as “Urwa” who was the mastermind of the 1996 assassination attempt on Gaddafi.¹²⁵ He was one of around a dozen LIFG members who fled Afghanistan for Iran after 9/11, most of whom made their way back to Libya when the 2011 uprising began. Long-exiled LIFG members from a number of other countries, particularly the UK, also returned to participate in the revolt, joining rebel forces in both east and west Libya. In several cases, they brought along their sons and other young male relatives. The older LIFG cohort with combat experience was considered an asset to the opposition given that many of those flocking to the frontlines were civilian volunteers without any formal military training.

Buhliqa’s decision to name the brigade after Omar Mukhtar, a member of the Sanussi Sufi order who is revered by Libyans for his role in fighting the Italian occupation during the colonial era, was also noteworthy, suggesting a more inclusive approach. The brigade comprised former LIFG members, defectors from the Libyan army and other non-Islamist Libyans seeking military training. “There was no attempt to classify people as LIFG or non-LIFG There was no sense of Islamists organising separately to the others”, recalled Buhliqa. “Omar al-Mukhtar was mixed At the frontline we had people getting drunk at night and others complaining about them”.¹²⁶

Many LIFG members died during the uprising, including Madhuni, who was killed on the eastern frontline in mid-April. Given his history, experience and standing, his death was considered a significant loss for the group.

Former LIFG members helped found or became leading figures in a number of other rebel units across Libya, including Katibat Shuhada Abu Salim (named after the “martyrs” of Abu Salim prison) and Katibat al-Nur in Derna, and Katibat Rafallah Sahati in Benghazi. After Gaddafi fled Tripoli in August and rebel forces took control of the capital, Belhaj was appointed head of the Tripoli Military Council by Mustafa Abdul Jalil who led the National Transitional Council (NTC).

In a media interview that same month, Noman Benotman noted that the LIFG “no longer exists under the old name and structure” but that it had regrouped under the LIMC name. “They accept the idea of a new democratic Libya and they have made it clear they will engage in and participate in any political process in the post-Gaddafi era”, he said. “Because they accept the democratic system they cannot be considered ‘jihadists’ in the international understanding of the term. They are also opposed to more extreme jihadists such as those from al-Qaeda”.¹²⁷

Benotman’s remarks echoed what LIFG leaders and rank-and-file had been telling foreign interlocutors monitoring any sign of extremist or al-Qaeda linked currents within Libya’s

rebel forces. Belhaj and other senior figures gave media interviews insisting they were fighting under the NTC's banner and were not interested in separating themselves or trying to claim the revolution as their own. In their own internal conversations, LIFG members acknowledged that it had been a mass of ordinary Libyans who rose up against the Gaddafi regime and ultimately achieved what they had sought since the 1980s. "It was not an LIFG revolution and it was not dependent on the LIFG. The revolution would have happened anyway if we had still been in prison", said Khalid al-Sharif. "But because the Libyan revolution became an armed one – unlike in Tunisia or Egypt – it wasn't surprising that the LIFG got involved in the way they did".¹²⁸

For those within the Gaddafi regime who had been sceptical about the LIFG revisions, the decision of the LIFG to join the 2011 revolt confirmed their suspicions. "The fact that Islamists and jihadists like the LIFG were early participating actors in the uprisings suggests that they had only exploited Saif al-Islam's need for reconciliation", one former regime official argued in 2016.¹²⁹ "They were ready and willing to abandon all the premises of their revisions once an opportunity to fight the regime appeared in the horizon Their sincerity was always in question Had there not been any uprisings, they probably would have stuck to their undertakings or else left the country. Had the regime been able to win in 2011, any LIFG or other jihadists would have been slaughtered by the regime".

Akeel Hussin Akeel, the former higher education minister who helped lay the groundwork for the LIFG dialogue process and wrote a preface to the revisions document, took a different view. "It was conciliation not reconciliation. They decided to put down arms but they never agreed with the regime or supported it".¹³⁰

For most LIFG members, the revisions constituted a specific process with a specific purpose and objective at a particular time and within a particular context.

"We continued supporting opposition currents and Libyan human rights groups trying to highlight abuses by the regime", noted Abdulbaset Buhliqa. "We cannot say that we made peace with the regime. In 2011, most of the Libyan population was rising against the regime; how could we stand apart from that?"¹³¹

Asked in a September 2011 interview with Al-Hayat newspaper if the revisions were still applicable, Sami al-Saadi replied:

"We tied the issue of banning confrontation with the state to good and evil. I do not think it is right or correct now to open these studies and address the revolutionaries by telling them: Do not raise arms. They were in a self-defence position. The revolution began as peaceful. The people took to the streets to tell Gaddafi we do not want you. They said this with their voices and bare chests. He surprised them with anti-aircraft guns and tanks; that is, with violence. Thus, they were defending themselves. It would be wrong and naive of us to tell them: Do not defend yourselves. I say this so that the corrective studies would not be taken as absolute words at any time and in any place. This issue (confrontation of the state) is tied to good and evil".¹³²

In an opinion piece published in the Guardian newspaper in September 2011, Belhaj inferred that the regime had not acted in good faith during the revisions:

“I engaged in negotiations with the Libyan regime as a result of which my group renounced violence on the understanding that we would participate in a process of reform. I was released in 2010, but there was no sign of reform. Meanwhile, the people’s dissatisfaction with the regime grew daily. With the start of the Arab spring, the conditions were set for the Libyan people to start their uprising. The revolution hoped to achieve its aims peacefully. But Gaddafi was prepared to exterminate his people in order to remain in power, so the Libyan people were forced to take up arms. My initial view that it was impossible to change the Gaddafi regime except by force was vindicated”.¹³³

The Former LIFG after Gaddafi

In the immediate aftermath of the 2011 uprising, many among the former LIFG now known as the LIMC, experienced something close to an existential crisis.¹³⁴ The group’s founding objective of overthrowing Gaddafi by force, though abandoned during the Abu Salim revisions process, reappeared during an uprising in which the former LIFG joined with the wider population, leaving ideological considerations aside. Now they faced the question of what role, if any, the former LIFG could play in post-Gaddafi Libya.

This was the focus of a LIFG/LIMC congress held in November 2011, the month after Gaddafi had been killed at the hands of rebel forces. Hundreds of members took part in discussions on whether the group should get involved in the nascent politics of Libya’s transition, focus on preaching (*da’wah*) or dissolve entirely given that their original goal had been achieved. While the congress ended with no defined strategy for the future, attendees voted to change the name of the LIMC to the Islamic Movement for Reform and elected a new consultative committee, comprising most previous LIFG Shura Council members (including Belhaj, Dawadi, Khalid al-Sharif, Qaid and Buhliqa, and headed by Sami al-Saadi). Among those present it is notable that there were no objections to Libya pursuing a democratic trajectory after Gaddafi, despite initial concerns that the former LIFG grassroots would view things differently, having been indoctrinated for decades in the belief that democracy was inherently anti-Islamic.

The changes in attitudes to democracy among the LIFG leadership – shared by most but not all their former rank-and-file – were indicative of wider trends in Muslim-majority countries at the time. “In the past we said that participation in any democratic or political activity is prohibited”, said Saadi. “We were not mature, politically speaking, and focused more on the practical reality of armed struggle more than researching the political landscape. We have experienced many things since then and have seen what happened in other Muslim countries. Many had followed what had happened in Turkey [where the ruling AK party had Islamist roots], and they liked it”.¹³⁵

Belhaj was influenced by what he had seen in Turkey and Malaysia. “They succeeded in developing their countries and their economies, and in establishing effective institutions that provide justice and welfare for their people This experience is worth aspiring towards”.¹³⁶ The examples of Tunisia and Egypt – where the electoral success in late 2011 of Ennahda in the former and the Muslim Brotherhood in the latter – also helped. “From an Islamic point of view, one must reform or change one’s thinking when one realises there is a better way”, Saadi said. “Libya was changing and we wanted to be involved”.¹³⁷

Toward their fellow Libyans and the international community, the leaders of the former LIFG appeared keen to demonstrate their credentials not only as nationalists (eg, their founding goal of replacing Gaddafi’s regime with an Islamic state was replaced with talk of the nation, or *al-watan*) but also as fledgling democrats. In his September 2011 column in the Guardian newspaper, Belhaj defended his past and attempted to project a new image of moderation and pragmatism with an Islamist framing.¹³⁸

The former LIFG did become involved in the political and security dynamics of post-Gaddafi Libya but not as a group. After rebranding itself as the Islamic Movement for Reform in late 2011, the LIMC failed to gain traction and eventually fizzled out. What at senior levels had been a relatively cohesive organisation as the LIFG and then LIMC began to fragment internally. Individual members of the former LIFG – particularly the leaders and Shura Council members – pursued their own paths, whether taking up positions within the transitional authorities or establishing political parties and running for election. Others from the rank-and-file were active in armed groups in several cities and towns across Libya, including Tripoli, Benghazi, Derna and Sabratha. Among the most prominent of these were Ziad Balam in Benghazi, Salem Derby in Derna and Abduljawad al-Badeen who joined federalists agitating for regional autonomy in eastern Libya. While some within the former LIFG grassroots were wary of democratic politics, they did not seek to prevent the 2012 elections (i.e., the first post-Gaddafi ballot) from taking place. In Derna, Salem Derby and other LIFG veterans coordinated with the transitional authorities to provide security for that vote.

Shortly after his release from Abu Salim in 2011, Khalid al-Sharif formed a ‘National Guard’, ostensibly aimed at preventing former regime elements from fleeing across the Tunisian border. It also ran its own detention centres. When the force came under the Ministry of Defence in early 2012, Sharif became the minister’s deputy in charge of borders and protection of key facilities. In this position, Sharif oversaw Hadba prison where scores of former regime figures – including Abdullah Senussi, Abuzaid Dorda and Muammar Gaddafi’s son, Saadi – were detained until 2017 when a Tripoli militia seized control of the facility and transferred the prisoners to another location. Human rights groups highlighted allegations of torture and ill-treatment at Hadba, where some of the prison guards were former LIFG members. In 2015, Sharif told Human Rights Watch that the former director of Hadba, a former LIFG member named Saleh al-Daiki, had been suspended because of such allegations, which included ill-treatment of Saadi Gaddafi.¹³⁹ Later, in something of a reversal of roles, Sharif facilitated dialogue in the prison, allowing a number of the high-profile former regime detainees to receive their fellow tribesmen for discussions about reconciliation.

Sadiq al-Ghaithi al-Obaidi, a former LIFG prisoner from Tobruk in eastern Libya, became another deputy defence minister, while Miftah al-Dawadi was appointed deputy minister for the martyrs and the missing. Dawadi served in that post until he died in a plane crash in Tunisia in February 2014. Under post-Gaddafi Libya's second transitional prime minister Ali Zeidan, Abdulbaset Buhliqa was appointed deputy interior minister, a role which involved engaging with security officials from several countries, including the UK, where he had once lived and had been designated. Sami al-Saadi was offered, but declined, the post of minister for the martyrs and missing. In many cases, the ascendance of former LIFG figures on a national and local level in the immediate aftermath of Gaddafi's fall had less to do with their LIFG past than political factors related to their individual experiences during the uprising, as well as personal tribal and other connections.

The former LIFG's political organising took different forms, splitting into two main currents. Belhaj became a founding member of the Homeland Party (al-Watan). Its slogan, "All Partners for the Homeland", reflected a diverse membership that ranged from former Muslim Brotherhood and LIFG members including Belhaj and Buhliqa, to non-Islamist business figures and more liberal Libyans active in civil society. In the 2012 parliamentary elections, for example, its lead candidate in Benghazi was a female academic and activist educated in the UK who did not wear hijab. Despite their nationalist messaging, Homeland Party candidates failed to win a single seat, including Belhaj who ran in the Tripoli neighbourhood where he had grown up.

Many of the former LIFG were uneasy with the inclusive approach of the Homeland Party and were drawn instead to the Moderate Nation (al-Umma al-Wasat) Party founded by Sami al-Saadi. Members of the party, which had a more overtly religious aspect, included Khalid al-Sharif, Dawadi, Qaid and Qanaifidh. Qaid, who ran in his hometown of Murzuq in southern Libya, won a seat in the General National Congress where he was adept at forming alliances. "Abdulwahab proved to be very good at the political game", observed Saadi, who unsuccessfully ran as a candidate in Tripoli.¹⁴⁰ In the following years, Saadi sought to make use of his background, history and religious scholarship to establish a counter-extremism institute but failed to get support from the transitional government.

Several of the signatories to the LIFG revisions say the direction they took after the fall of Gaddafi reflected the evolution in their thinking. "All the leaders of the former LIFG moved towards politics even though we had the tools – weapons – to impose ourselves if we wished", said Khalid al-Sharif.¹⁴¹ This assertion belied the fact that politics in the post-Gaddafi period was largely beholden to either the threat or use of force. Most political factions across the ideological spectrum, from Islamist to anti-Islamist, had direct or indirect ties with armed groups, several of them ostensibly under the control of the interior or defence ministries. In the case of former LIFG leaders who decided to participate in politics or take up posts in transitional governments, these links gave them more clout.

Several years after Libya's transition unravelled in 2014 – partly due to dynamics supported by former LIFG members – a number of the signatories to the revisions maintained that their commitment to a democratic future for Libya still stands. "The way we formed political parties and took part in elections reflects the philosophical path we were on",

said Qaid. “I remain convinced that a democratic Libya is inevitable and that it is the best system for us”.¹⁴²

The former LIFG continued to face residual suspicion among the general Libyan population, which was grounded in the perception that they had not changed their jihadist ways. This was one of the reasons why the political parties they founded performed so badly in post-Gaddafi elections. Their opponents used the lingering belief that the LIFG had been affiliated with al-Qaeda despite the insistence of former members that this was not the case. One prominent Libyan political figure regularly briefed foreign diplomats claiming there were “dozens of al-Qaeda members” within the transitional authorities, a reference to those who had either been LIFG members in the past or had been tenuously associated with the group. Even though the LIFG was defunct and its leaders and rank-and-file followed different political and personal paths after the fall of Gaddafi, they were often collectively referred to as *al muqatilah* (the fighters) in public discourse. Media outlets owned or funded by their political opponents sought to portray the LIFG as still in existence in the form of a secretive group pursuing shadowy agendas to control and dominate Libya. Accusing adversaries of being LIFG, even if they were not, became a common and potent smear.

After Libya tipped into civil conflict in 2014, members of the former LIFG responded in different ways. A handful, including Noman Benotman, initially supported Khalifa Haftar, the commander who in May 2014 launched a military offensive ostensibly aimed at “terrorists” but which also targeted the then parliament in Tripoli. The offensive sparked a power struggle leading to years of civil conflict.

Others – including Belhaj, Saadi, Sharif and Qaid – were opposed to Haftar. They backed the Libya Dawn militia coalition that routed Haftar’s militia allies from Tripoli in August 2014 following parliamentary elections that favoured his political allies. As alliances shifted in the following years, most of the prominent former LIFG figures lost ground and influence. By 2019, the majority of the former leaders of the LIFG and a significant number of its rank-and-file were again living in exile outside Libya. Some, including Belhaj and Sharif, took part in efforts by international organisations trying to mediate an end to the civil conflict. Accusations inside Libya that individual former members of the LIFG retained links to militias there continued and, in January 2019, the country’s attorney general issued an arrest warrant for Belhaj for alleged complicity in attacks on oil installations. Belhaj denied the charges, insisting it was a “plot to distance [him] from the political scene”.¹⁴³

The Enduring Challenge of the Younger Generation

The six signatories to the LIFG revisions represented an older generation with a particular experience beginning in Afghanistan in the 1980s. But the younger generation of Libyan militants, which included sons and nephews of those rounded up or killed during the crackdown against the LIFG and other jihadist groups in the 1990s, were exposed to more radical ideological currents emerging in the early 2000s. While Saif al-Islam Gaddafi had hoped the LIFG recantations would influence that younger cohort and help draw them away from militancy, there were already signs in Abu Salim prison of inter-generational

differences between the older LIFG members and younger militants inspired by new figures such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian-born leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq. In March 2010, Belhaj and Saadi complained to Omar Ashour, a scholar then visiting Libya to meet those involved in the revisions process, that some younger militants did not respect the LIFG leadership and were challenging their authority.¹⁴⁴

Many of the younger inmates had either fought in Iraq – where some of their fellow Libyans had carried out suicide bombings, a tactic never used by the LIFG – or had been arrested while trying to get there. According to Abdulwahab al-Qaid, the younger jihadists were poorly educated (few had even finished high school) and were radicalised by a broader cause: “Our grievances were domestic – related to the Gaddafi regime – and therefore easier to address than grievances that are rooted in a more transnational agenda as theirs were”.¹⁴⁵

After the LIFG leadership drafted their revisions, the Gaddafi regime offered the prospect of release to prisoners who were not members of the LIFG if they agreed with the principles within the LIFG revisions document. As a result, in order to secure their release, a significant number of the younger non-LIFG prisoners are believed to have opportunistically signed up to the revisions, even if they regarded the LIFG leadership with scorn. Their low level of education meant they were unlikely to have substantially engaged with the scholarly document detailing the theological underpinning for the recantations. Referring to attempts to engage with what he called “grassroots jihadis” in the prison, Noman Benotman said in 2010:

“A few hundred were told to read the book. Most of them said they didn’t understand anything because it was sophisticated and complicated. It is nine chapters written in a highly academic style. Here is the problem. We have a book from one of the most influential groups in the jihadi movement, but we don’t know how to disseminate its ideas”.¹⁴⁶

Almost a decade later, some senior figures from the former LIFG expressed regret that there hadn’t been more engagement with the younger militants. “Perhaps if people had taken time to work on them more, we wouldn’t have had the problems we had after Gaddafi was gone”, said one in 2019.¹⁴⁷

After the 2011 uprising, many of these younger militants went on to form radical groups which opposed a democratic trajectory for post-Gaddafi Libya. Chief among them was Ansar al-Sharia, which developed several branches across Libya and was later designated a terrorist organisation by the UN. Some of its members participated in the September 2012 attack on the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi that resulted in the deaths of the American ambassador and several of his colleagues.¹⁴⁸ Many subsequently joined Islamic State (IS) when it emerged in Libya.

Initially, some former LIFG members and associates tried to engage with these elements and convince them to embrace a democratic path.¹⁴⁹ In addition, Ali Sallabi attempted to draw on the lessons of the LIFG revisions process in order to persuade them against using violence.¹⁵⁰ These efforts failed, partly due to the fact the younger militants accused the

former LIFG leaders of being sell-outs, not only because of their dialogue with the Gaddafi regime but also because they supported a democratic transition after the 2011 uprising.¹⁵¹ As Islamic State developed its presence in Libya, it targeted members of the former LIFG – particularly its leaders – both in its propaganda and operations.

Conclusions

The LIFG's revisions process followed a similar pattern to that previously seen in Egyptian, Yemeni, Saudi and other cases of collective and individual jihadist de-radicalisation.¹⁵² Key to the initiation, development and ultimate result of the process were 1) the role of leaders – on both the LIFG and regime side – who were able to deliver their rank-and-file in the case of the former and overrule sceptics in the case of both; 2) the role of skilled and trusted mediators who could introduce confidence-building measures and follow through on them; and 3) the use of incentives, both incremental and final, as in the offer of possible release from prison. Although on an individual and group level several of the LIFG leaders had already begun re-examining worldviews and rethinking strategies some years before following the group's heavy military losses, other factors (beyond an obvious self-interest in getting out of prison) created an environment ripe for the revisions process. As Abdulwahab al-Qaid observed:

“There was a convergence of several dynamics: the Gaddafi regime was changing; the world was changing after 9/11; we had been going through our own personal evolutions in thinking as a result of our experiences; and we were watching a new generation – a younger and fiercer generation – of jihadis emerging and making mistakes”.

The LIFG did not just abandon armed opposition to the Gaddafi regime. Its leaders also produced a 417-page document detailing the theological underpinning of their decision, which de-legitimised violence as a political tool. As a result, the ideological framing of the LIFG revisions, while rooted in a very Libyan context, could be applied to cases outside Libya. This explains the use of the book in prisons in de-radicalisation programs in countries including Algeria and Morocco.

Within the Libyan context, the revisions did not mean that the LIFG decided to support the Gaddafi regime but that its members would no longer oppose it militarily. Furthermore, for most of the LIFG cadre, it was a specific process with a specific purpose and objective at a particular time and within a particular context. For this reason, the LIFG leaders did not consider that their early participation in the 2011 uprising against Gaddafi constituted a reneging on what they agreed during the revisions process. Instead, they insisted that process had been one of conciliation but not reconciliation.

The experience of debating worldviews and strategies with their fellow LIFG members but also regime officials and external mediators, particularly Ali Sallabi, during the years-long revisions process proved impactful for the six LIFG leaders who drafted and signed the final document. That, along with the experience of the 2011 uprising – and, in the case of those such as Belhaj, Sharif and Saadi, the experience of living in different countries

with different political systems – led them to abandon the opposition to democracy and dream of establishing an Islamic state that, along with the goal of overthrowing Gaddafi, had characterised the early years of the LIFG’s history. Instead, they not only supported a democratic path for Libya but actively participated. Two of the signatories, Sami al-Saadi and Abdelhakim Belhaj, formed political parties with the remaining four joining either of the two parties. Several of the six signatories ran in parliamentary elections in 2012, though Abdulwahab al-Qaid was the only one to win a seat. While they maintained links with non-jihadist armed groups in post-Gaddafi Libya, the fact the LIFG leaders established political parties, ran for and voted in elections, and served in key ministerial and security posts in several transitional governments, provides strong indication they had left their jihadist past behind.

From a contextual perspective, the process of dialogue between the regime and the LIFG did occur in a transitional phase. Though not a post-authoritarian phase, the broader context was one where the Gaddafi regime sought to demonstrate to the international community its intention to reform, albeit in a limited way.

Yet, the revisions process was not used as an opportunity to address past injustice. While the LIFG cadre renounced violence as a means to overthrow the regime, the latter failed to acknowledge that its repression of political opponents may have been counterproductive. The one-sidedness of the reflection, along with the fact the dialogue was conducted in prison meant that, by design, the process fell short of being tantamount to a formal transitional justice process.

The perception that the regime failed to acknowledge its own shortcomings was compounded by its failure to live up to its own promises. The release of prisoners after the revisions process concluded was only partially implemented. This in turn created a dynamic of “winners and losers” and therefore further undermined the intended objective.

In retrospect, the Gaddafi regime’s approach to dialogue with the LIFG failed to meet the basic standards for restorative justice. By design, the process was unable to provide the regime and the LIFG the opportunity to address past offences in a holistic, collaborative, and humanising fashion. While the dialogue culminated with the publication of the LIFG’s revisions, it failed to bring about a resolution that would lend itself towards reparation and that would prevent further harm or victimisation. Moreover, the lack of transparency that characterised the dialogue process – along with the ulterior motives behind the media showcasing of the prisoners’ release – influenced public perception about the process. The LIFG leaders’ buy-in to the dialogue process was predicated on their desire for freedom, their own convictions, and more importantly, the regime’s predisposition to make amends with them. However, the optics surrounding the dialogue and its outcome shaped a narrative whereby the LIFG leaders appeared to have merely renounced violence in exchange for freedom. This framing shifted the onus for honouring the agreement on the LIFG, whose burden of proof for not being labelled as a terrorist group became never to engage in violence.

Ultimately, it can be argued that the threshold for genuine trust and reconciliation was never truly met. But it is also certain that the security environment at the time – in Libya

and elsewhere – was skewed by the post-2001 framing of terrorism. This contributed to the LIFG being labelled as terrorists – a dynamic which carried over way beyond the dialogue, in particular by creating a meta-conflict between the LIFG and the regime. Thus while the LIFG's emergence in the 1990s was symptomatic of the wider frustration felt by Libyan youth chafing under the Gaddafi regime's authoritarianism, these historical realities were overlooked as the regime weaponised the post-2001 terrorism label against them. By design, this meta-conflict hampered the ability of the dialogue process to create a consensus and framework informed by the multitude of lessons that transitional justice could have offered for the benefit of all Libyans.

Annex 1: Chronology of Events

Late 1980s	Those who later comprised the LIFG begin to organise in Afghanistan and Pakistan.
1990–1994	The LIFG builds a clandestine network inside Libya.
1995	The LIFG declares its existence following clashes in Benghazi.
1995–1999	LIFG insurgency in Libya, concentrated in eastern Libya, in which among other things they made several attempts to assassinate Muammar Gaddafi, including the Bab al Azziziya compound attack.
Jun 1996	Abu Salim prison massacre in Tripoli. More than 1,200 inmates, including LIFG members, are killed by regime forces.
Oct 2001	The LIFG is included on the UN 1267 Committee Consolidated List of individuals and entities associated with al Qaida or the Taliban.
Dec 2005	Most of the LIFG’s historically most important figures – its emir Abdelhakim Belhaj; its religious ideologue Sami al-Saadi; two of its military commanders Khalid al-Sharif and Mustafa Qanaifidh; former emir Miftah al-Dawadi; and Abdulwahab al-Qaid – are in Abu Salim prison in Libya. Belhaj, Saadi and Sharif have been “rendered” to Libya by western intelligence agencies in post 9/11 security sweeps.
Jan 2007	The six members of the Shura Council mentioned above are engaged in talks with the Gaddafi regime which took on a more structured form the following year.
Aug 2009	The LIFG publishes “Corrective Studies of the Concepts of Jihad, Accountability and the Judgment of the People”, the culmination of internal discussions and their dialogue with the Gaddafi regime.
Mar 2010	More than 200 inmates are released from Abu Salim prison, among them Abdelhakim Belhaj, Sami al-Saadi and Khalid al-Sharif, but not the other three leaders who signed the revisions.
Feb 2011	Anti-regime protests erupt in Libya. The Gaddafi regime releases more prisoners from Abu Salim, including the three remaining LIFG leaders.
Oct 2011	Muammar Gaddafi is killed by rebel forces, bringing an end to the uprising in which the former LIFG members played key roles.
Nov 2011	The former LIFG, now renamed the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change, holds a congress to debate future directions. The LIMC later fizzles out and the former leaders go in different directions, with several forming political parties and running for elections.

Endnotes

1. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group was listed by the UN al-Qaeda Sanctions Committee on 6 October 2001 pursuant to paragraph 8(c) of resolution 1333 (2000) as being associated with Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden or the Taliban for “participating in the financing, planning, facilitating, preparing or perpetrating of acts or activities by, in conjunction with, under the name of, on behalf or in support of”, “supplying, selling or transferring arms and related materiel to” or “otherwise supporting acts or activities of” Al-Qaeda (QDe.004), Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. The listing includes the assertion that the LIFG “formally merged with Al-Qaeda” in 2007, but this is denied by the LIFG leadership. The listing also asserts that the LIFG participated with the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group in planning the 2003 bombings in Casablanca, Morocco and that it had also been linked to the 2004 attacks in Madrid, Spain. These assertions appear to originate from allegations which appeared in the Spanish media in 2005 linking LIFG member Ziyad Hashem and Abdelhakim Belhaj with Serhane Ben Abdelmajid Fakhri, a Tunisian Islamist and suspected ringleader in the Madrid attacks. The article, which cited a leaked Spanish police report, also claimed that Hashem was linked by marriage to Mustapha Maimouni, a Moroccan who was detained in Morocco in connection with the Casablanca bombings. According to specialist Alison Pargeter, these allegations do not appear to be substantiated (see LIFG: An Organization in Eclipse, published by Jamestown Foundation in November, 2005). They have been denied by the LIFG leadership. The LIFG was designated by the U.S. Treasury in 2001. The U.S. State Department designated the LIFG a foreign terrorist organisation in 2004 and removed this designation in 2015. Britain proscribed the LIFG as a terrorist group in 2005 and removed it from the list of proscribed groups in November 2019.
2. More than 1,200 inmates are estimated to have been killed by security forces at Abu Salim prison in Tripoli in 1996: “Libya: June 1996 Killings at Abu Salim Prison”, Human Rights Watch (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2006/06/27/libya-june-1996-killings-abu-salim-prison>), June 2006.
3. Remarks by a former member of Libyan National Dialogue Committee, at IFIT conference, Barcelona, November 2019.
4. Interviews with Libyans who fought in Afghanistan including leaders and rank-and-file of the former LIFG conducted by authors in Libya, UK, Tunisia, Ireland and Turkey 2011-2019.
5. Abdelhakim Belhaj, remarks at symposium “From Bullets to Ballots – Transformations from Armed to Unarmed Political Activism” at the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (<https://www.dohainstitute.org/ar/Events/From-Bullets-to-Ballots-Transformations-from-Armed-to-Unarmed-Political-Activism/Pages/VideoGalleryPage.aspx?VideoFolder=Sixth-Session&speakerID=36330>), the Doha Institute, November 2018.
6. Interview with authors, Turkey, 2019.
7. Interview with primary author, Libya, 2012.
8. Interview with authors, Turkey, 2019.
9. Interview with authors, Turkey, 2019.
10. Interviews with former members of the LIFG Shura Council, 2019.
11. Interviews with authors, 2019.
12. Alison Pargeter, “LIFG: An Organization in Eclipse”, Jamestown Foundation, November 2005.
13. Interviews with former LIFG members, 2012.
14. “Statement #14: Regarding the American Aggression against Sudan and Afghanistan”, Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, 25 August 1998.
15. “Statement #21: Regarding the Occupation of Iraq”, Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, 11 April 2003.
16. Interviews with former LIFG members who met Bin Laden, 2011-2019.
17. Zawahiri and Abu Laith al-Libi made the claim via two video clips produced by Al-Qaida’s propaganda arm, Al-Sahab. The first clip featured Zawahiri and the second featured Abu Laith al-Libi.
18. Interviews with former LIFG members, 2011-2019.
19. Anis Sharif, remarks at symposium “From Bullets to Ballots - Transformations from Armed to Unarmed Political Activism” at the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (<https://www.dohainstitute.org/ar/Events/From-Bullets-to-Ballots-Transformations-from-Armed-to-Unarmed-Political-Activism/Pages/VideoGalleryPage.aspx?VideoFolder=Fifth-Session&speakerID=36326>), the Doha Institute, November 2018.
20. Interview with primary author, Turkey, 2019.
21. Interviews with former LIFG members, 2011-2019.
22. Amnesty International, “Libya of Tomorrow – What Hope for Human Rights?” July 2010.
23. The prison conditions which gave rise to the revolt were acknowledged by Special Rapporteur on torture at the time, Sir Nigel S. Rodley. In his 1999 report, he

- noted his concerns regarding the death in custody of several political detainees in Abu Salim. He said, “Their deaths were allegedly the result of torture and other forms of ill-treatment, as well as harsh prison conditions, including lack of adequate medical care, overcrowded prison cells, poor diet and poor hygiene. Injuries sustained during interrogation are also said not to receive adequate medical treatment”. See Report of the Special Rapporteur on torture, Sir Nigel S. Rodley, submitted pursuant to Commission on Human Rights resolution 1998/38 (UN Doc: E/CN.4/1999/61).
24. Interview with authors, Turkey, 2019.
 25. Abdelhakim Belhaj, remarks at symposium “From Bullets to Ballots – Transformations from Armed to Unarmed Political Activism” at the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (<https://www.dohainstitute.org/ar/Events/From-Bullets-to-Ballots-Transformations-from-Armed-to-Unarmed-Political-Activism/Pages/VideoGalleryPage.aspx?VideoFolder=Sixth-Session&speakerID=36330>), the Doha Institute, November 2018.
 26. Interview with primary author, Turkey, 2019.
 27. Omar Ashour, “De-Radicalizing Jihadists the Libyan Way”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (carnegieendowment.org/sada/40531), 7 April 2010.
 28. Interviews with former LIFG members, 2011-2019.
 29. “Libya: Words to Deeds, the Urgent Need for Human Rights Reform”, Human Rights Watch, 2006.
 30. Interview with authors, Turkey, 2019.
 31. Interview with authors, Turkey, 2019.
 32. Electronic interview with primary author, 2016.
 33. Interview with primary author, 2019.
 34. The extent of Libyan participation in jihadist activity in Iraq became apparent with the 2007 seizure by U.S. forces of significant cache of recruitment files from an al Qaeda safe house in the Iraqi city of Sinjar. Of the 595 files recovered, 112 of them pertained to Libyans. The Sinjar documents suggest that a proportionally higher percentage of Libyans joined the insurgency in Iraq than nationals from other countries in the region. They also showed that more than 60 percent of the Libyan fighters had listed their home city as Derna and almost 24 percent had come from Benghazi. The two eastern Libya cities had long been nodes of domestic jihadist activity, including by the LIFG in the 1990s, but there is no evidence linking the LIFG as group to the recruitment or passage of Libyan fighters to Iraq. One former LIFG member from Benghazi, Abdel-Hakim al-Gritli (a.k.a. Abu Hafs al-Libi), became a key associate of al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi before he was killed there by U.S. forces in 2004.
 35. Electronic interview with primary author, 2016.
 36. Electronic interview with primary author, 2016.
 37. “Combating Terrorism in Libya Through Dialogue and Reintegration”, International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, March 2010.
 38. Transcript of Saif al-Islam Gaddafi’s speech, contained in “Combating Terrorism in Libya Through Dialogue and Reintegration”, a report by the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, March 2010.
 39. Interviews with former LIFG leaders, 2011-2019.
 40. Interview with authors, Turkey, 2019.
 41. Mahan Abedin, “From Mujahid to Activist: An Interview with a Libyan Veteran of the Afghan Jihad”, Spotlight on Terror, 2005.
 42. Camille Tawil, “Al-Qaida wa Akhawatia”, London: Saqi Books, 2007.
 43. Benotman’s open letter to bin Laden was published in a number of outlets including Foreign Policy magazine in 2010.
 44. Interview with Ali Sallabi published in al-Tajdid, a Moroccan outlet, in April 2010. <https://www.maghress.com/attajdid/57479>
 45. Interview with authors, Turkey, 2019.
 46. “Delivered Into Enemy Hands: U.S.-Led Abuse and Rendition of Opponents to Gaddafi’s Libya,” Human Rights Watch (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/09/05/delivered-enemy-hands/us-led-abuse-and-rendition-opponents-gaddafis-libya>), 2012.
 47. Interview with Sami al-Saadi by Camille Tawil, published in al-Hayat newspaper in September 2011 and accessed on Tawil’s blog: <http://camilletawil.blogspot.com/2011/09/sami-al-saadi-interview-on-lifg-aq.html>.
 48. Interview with authors, Turkey, 2019.
 49. Interview with Ali Sallabi published in al-Tajdid, a Moroccan outlet, in April 2010. <https://www.maghress.com/attajdid/57479>
 50. Interview with authors, Turkey, 2019.
 51. Interview with authors, Turkey, 2019.
 52. Interview with authors, Turkey, 2019.
 53. Interview with primary author, Libya, 2011.
 54. Interview with primary author, 2019.
 55. Interviews with primary author in the UK, 2015, 2018.

56. Interview with Ali Sallabi published in al-Tajdid, a Moroccan outlet, in April 2010. <https://www.maghress.com/attajdid/57479>
57. Interview with authors, Turkey, 2019.
58. Interview with authors, Turkey, 2019.
59. Interview with primary author, Turkey, 2019.
60. The letter was republished by online media outlet Elaph: <https://elaph.com/Web/NewsPapers/2009/6/450006.html>
61. Interview with authors, Turkey, 2019.
62. Interview with authors, Turkey, 2019.
63. Interview with primary author, 2015.
64. Interviews with primary author, 2011-2018, and with both authors, 2019.
65. Interview with primary author, 2019.
66. Interview with Ali Sallabi published in al-Tajdid, a Moroccan outlet, in April 2010. <https://www.maghress.com/attajdid/57479>
67. Interviews with primary author, Libya, 2011.
68. Omar Ashour, "Post-Jihadism: Libya and the Global Transformations of Armed Islamist Movements", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 23(3), 2011.
69. Interviews with primary author, 2019.
70. Interview with primary author, 2019.
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COVER PHOTO

Members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group walk out upon their release from Abu Salim prison in Tripoli March 24, 2010. REUTERS/ Ismail Zoitouny

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