



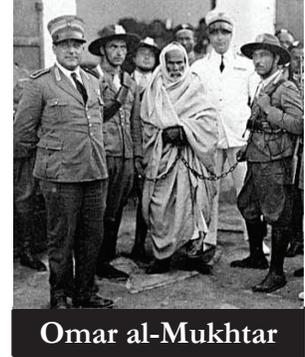
Terrorism Monitor

In-Depth Analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME IX, ISSUE 10 ♦ MARCH 10, 2011

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Omar al-Mukhtar

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LIBYAN LOYALISTS AND DISSIDENTS VIE FOR TUAREG FIGHTERS

With the fate of Libya in the balance, both sides in the struggle to determine its future are appealing to North Africa’s indigenous Tuareg warriors for military help. Libya’s own Tuareg population of roughly 50,000 has been simultaneously courted and deprived of its cultural and ethnic heritage by the Qaddafi government. The regime classes the non-Semitic Berber Tuareg as a branch of the Arab nation and describes its indigenous non-Semitic Tamasheq language as merely a dialect of Arabic. In the past, Tuareg fighters poured into northern Libya in 1912 to defend the Ottoman provinces from Italian invasion and later served in large numbers in Mu’ammr Qaddafi’s now defunct Islamic Legion. [1]

While reports and rumors of Qaddafi’s recruitment of the Tuareg continued to circulate, the newly-resigned Libyan consul-general to Mali has issued an appeal to the Tuareg to “align themselves with the people to fight Mu’ammr Qaddafi.” The former Libyan representative, Musa al-Kuni, slipped out of Mali on March 1 and announced his resignation when he reached Paris the same day. Himself a Tuareg, Musa claimed to speak on behalf of the Libyan Tuareg dwelling in the Sebha region of the Libyan interior. Sebha is home to a Libyan military base once connected to Qaddafi’s nuclear weapons development program. Musa’s brother is Ibrahim al-Kuni, one of North Africa’s foremost Arabic-language novelists. The former diplomat said that the Libyan Tuareg were suffering “an injustice” by being portrayed as “Qaddafi’s mercenaries” (AFP, March 8).

Musa al-Kuni’s appeal appeared to have little resonance across the border in Tuareg-dominated northern Mali, where elected Tuareg representatives described

him as “an imposter and an opportunist” and declared “this gentleman represents only himself” (AFP, March 9).

A Bamako daily suggested that former Tuareg rebel Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, who has close ties to the Libyan regime, plays a key role in recruiting and forwarding Tuareg fighters from across the Sahel and Sahara. The daily states Ag Bahanga has been spotted leading a convoy of 30 4x4 vehicles on their way to Libya via the Tuareg town of Djanet in Algeria from a point near the Algerian-Mauritanian border (Le Combat, Bamako, March 3; for Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, see Terrorism Focus, February 25, 2009; Terrorism Monitor Briefs, November 4, 2010; Militant Leadership Monitor, April 2, 2010). Ag Bahanga was last reported to have returned to Mali from self-exile in Libya in January to accept the Algiers Accord and accept reintegration, though it is not impossible that Ag Bahanga has since accepted a commission to raise Tuareg fighters for use in Libya (Info Matin [Bamako], January 18; L'Observateur [Bamako], January 17).

Libya has backed Tuareg rebel movements in Niger and Mali and acted as an intermediary in negotiations, a method of operation that has not impressed Algeria, which has also inserted itself as a peace negotiator in the Tuareg rebellions.

Elsewhere in Mali, representatives of the northern Seventh Region (Timbuktu) gathered to declare, “The representatives of the North Mali communities, signatory to this document, offer their unwavering support to the Guide of the Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya [i.e. Mu’ammarr Qaddafi] as well as to the Libyan people” (L’Aube (Bamako), March 3).

Note:

1. See Andrew McGregor, “Can African Mercenaries Save the Libyan Regime?” Jamestown Foundation Special Commentary, February 23.

BURUNDIAN FORCES TAKE HEAVY LOSSES IN SUCCESSFUL FIGHT AGAINST SOMALIA’S AL-SHABAAB

While the world’s attention focuses on the uprisings in Arab countries, Burundian troops have made significant progress in leading an offensive against Somalia’s al-Shabaab movement, the first sign of real military progress since the African Union Mission in Somalia

(AMISOM) was created in early 2007. Burundi’s contribution of four battalions represents roughly 3,000 of AMISOM’s total of 8,000 troops, with the rest drawn from Uganda’s military.

The offensive is a joint operation involving AMISOM forces and troops of Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The AMISOM offensive began by rolling up the elaborate system of trenches and tunnels that al-Shabaab has used to infiltrate their fighters into government-held areas of Mogadishu. Burundian troops supported by Somali TFG militias seized the old Ministry of Defense, the Milk Factory and a number of other important sites in Mogadishu that had acted as bases for al-Shabaab forces, reportedly killing 80 Islamists (Agence Burundaise de Presse, February 24; Shabelle Media Network, February 28). Al-Shabaab forces counter-attacked in an effort to retake the Defense Ministry building on March 5, but were repelled by Burundian forces in heavy fighting (Shabelle Media Network, March 5). An AMISOM spokesman claimed African Union forces now controlled 60 to 70% of Mogadishu, representing a major reversal of fortunes for the Islamist radicals (Daily Monitor [Kampala], March 7).

Though government officials claimed only light casualties in the Mogadishu offensive, military sources in Bujumbura have confirmed a total of 43 dead and 110 wounded is closer to the mark since the offensive began on February 23 (AFP, March 5). Wounded soldiers are being transported to the Bouffard French military hospital in Djibouti (Suna Times, March 2; AFP, March 2). Al-Shabaab claims to have taken a number of Burundian prisoners and says it is holding the bodies of 18 dead Burundian soldiers (BBC, March 4). The Islamists have also posted photos of burnt and mutilated Burundian soldiers on the internet.

In ritual fashion the bodies of dead Burundian soldiers were dragged through the streets of Mogadishu by al-Shabaab fighters and sympathizers. Al-Shabaab radio reported: “Many Muslim residents and top Islamist officials turned up at the stadium where the bodies of the dead soldiers were displayed and dragged. The residents expressed satisfaction over the death of the Christian forces” (Radio Andalus [Kismayo], February 24).

Burundi’s military commanders have attempted to downplay the losses; Chief of Staff General Godefroid Niyombare responded to inquiries by saying, “Whether six, ten or 20 are dead, I don’t see what would change

if I told you,” adding, “What matters is not so much the number of victims in the Somali war as the work already done by our courageous soldiers“ (AFP, March 2; PANA Online [Dakar], March 2). With questions being asked in Burundi regarding the apparently open-ended Burundian commitment to a military mission in Somalia, government authorities appear to have implemented a plan to keep awareness of Burundian casualties to a minimum. Families have complained of a lack of news about their dead or wounded and local media coverage of burial ceremonies has been banned (Radio Netherlands, March 10).

At the height of the offensive, al-Shabaab leader Shaykh Ahmad Abdi Godane “Abu Zubayr” issued an audiotape directed at “the people and government of Burundi,” calling for the withdrawal of Burundi’s military from Somalia:

It is obvious that your boys and your forces have been deceived and that they do not have a clue or understand the realities that exist in Mogadishu. You have to know that in Mogadishu, countries and alliances that are much stronger than you have been defeated. The United States failed in Mogadishu with their coalition from all around the world. Ethiopia lost after they brought a power that is much stronger than yours. Now, your beating started and the evidence is the dead bodies of your forces being dragged in the streets and your prisoners seized in the fight. If you do not take that as a warning, your loss will be even worse than that of the previous occupiers (SomaliMemo.net, March 2).

The message did not mention Ugandan forces, suggesting Godane was trying to create internal divisions within Burundi even as his al-Shabaab fighters were under heavy pressure by Burundian forces.

The operations in Mogadishu are part of a larger coordinated offensive involving AMISOM, TFG and even Ethiopian forces at several vital points in southern Somalia. AMISOM forces aided by Ethiopian troops are reported to have taken the towns of Bulo Hawo and Luq near the Kenyan border from al-Shabaab elements. There are also reports of large Ethiopian troop movements in central Somalia, apparently heading to the al-Bur district to hook up with the Somali Sufi militia Ahlu Sunna wa'l-Jama'a for an offensive against al-Shabaab strongholds in the area (AFP, March 8). The controversial presence of Ethiopian troops in Somalia

was confirmed by TFG president Shaykh Sharif Shaykh Ahmad, though the president, who had once led the fight against the 2006 Ethiopian invasion and occupation, qualified his remarks by stating the Ethiopians were only providing logistical support to TFG forces (Shabelle Media Network, March 6).

Though the Libyan uprising has overshadowed important developments in Somalia, the Libyan crisis may have an inadvertent effect on AMISOM operations – Qaddafi’s Libya supplies 15% of the budget for the African Union (East African [Nairobi], March 7). If the regime falls it will have a direct effect on AMISOM operations unless the United States and Europe steps in to make up the lost revenues.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Protests in Yemen

By Erik Stier

As calls intensify for the resignation of Ali Abdullah Salih, Yemen’s president of 32 years, the immediate impact of the political unrest on al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) remains unclear. Thus far, the turbulence appears to have had minimal impact on the group ideologically, logistically or strategically. Through Malahim Media, AQAP issued a belated commentary on the Tunisian revolution and touched broadly on the wave of Arab uprisings, yet it has remained silent concerning the domestic upheaval within Yemen. The group’s position on the political periphery denotes its limited involvement in the current uprising and implies that it will likely utilize this period of decreased attention to improve its position against whomever remains standing when the dust settles in Sana’a.

One month after Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution, AQAP released the latest version of its bimonthly Arabic-language online magazine, Sada Al Malahim. Of 52

pages, only one was dedicated solely to the events in Tunisia. In the opening editorial, entitled “To our people in Tunisia, do not lose what has been gained,” the author congratulates Tunisians on their “jihad,” which he says will return the country to Islamic rule and “send secularism and democracy to hell” (Sada Al Malahim, February 15).

Ignoring the dominant secular and democratic themes of the Tunisian uprising, AQAP’s revisionist history places the revolution into a broader jihadist narrative. It claims victory for Islamists and urges the Tunisian public to make use of the opportunity to create a system governed not by man’s law but by God’s (Sada Al Malahim, February 15).

AQAP’s second reference to the revolutions came in an audio statement entitled “Ibn Ali and Ibn Saud,” in which Shaykh Ibrahim al-Rubaysh broadly encourages revolt against Arab dictators, but warns that their replacement with anything short of Shari’a is bound to see problems of chaos and corruption continue. As the title suggests, much of the ten-minute statement was spent chastising the Saudi king for harboring the former Tunisian president and criticizing the Saudi religious community for its silence. Al-Rubaysh, a former Guantanamo detainee and one of AQAP’s most prolific ideologues, continues to stress the importance of choosing the proper replacement for fallen leaders, imploring the public to take advantage of the opportunity before them (Malahim Media, February 26).

While AQAP may share with Yemen’s opposition protesters a desire to see Salih’s regime fall, the group seems to be devoting little attention to the Yemeni uprising. Furthermore, the movement most capable of ousting the current government is pushing for legitimate democracy, not violent extremism. In response to the popular calls for a new transparency, Salih and his government have been brandishing their own democratic credentials (Saba News, February 26). In this political battle, there is no winning side for AQAP, which is likely planning for the future instead of trying to capitalize on the existing revolutionary politics.

Throughout the past year, AQAP has carried out attacks that have increased recruitment and expanded its base among specific populations. With anti-regime demonstrators calling primarily for democracy, AQAP is unlikely to gain new members from today’s pool of protesters. Its recent declaration of war against the

northern Zaydi Shi’a Houthi movement appears to be a far more important milestone in terms of expanding AQAP’s range. Three articles in the latest issue of Sada Al Malahim dealt with the Houthis and the situation in Saada governorate. AQAP’s war on the Houthis, announced between the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt, serves dual purposes in that it attacks ideological enemies and simultaneously builds support among the northern Sunni tribes centered in al-Jawf (Malahim Media, January 28).

Following a ceasefire declared by President Salih in February 2010, the Houthis retained control of checkpoints and prisoners captured during the sixth Saada war, leading to escalating tensions with the surrounding tribes. Skirmishes between the Houthis and the tribes that fought alongside the government prior to the ceasefire have continued ever since (al-Masdar, January 17). AQAP’s successful attacks on the Houthis in late 2010 and subsequent rhetorical emphasis on the group have sent a clear message that AQAP intends to continue assisting al-Jawf’s Sunnis and capitalize on the sentiment that the tribes were abandoned by the government (Sada Al Malahim, January 3).

According to Shaykh Abdullah al-Jumaili of al-Jawf, that tactic is working. In a February 21 interview the shaykh stated that the outrage stemming from the destruction of farms and schools during the last war with the Houthis, combined with lack of development, an 80% unemployment rate and an abundance of arms, has created fertile ground for AQAP recruitment. “Right now, I see young people joining al-Qaeda,” said the shaykh. “They don’t have opportunities to work and now they’re looking for someone to feed them. They’ll be with whoever takes care of them.” [1]

Meanwhile, AQAP’s stronghold in southern Yemen appears unaffected by current political turmoil. In the month prior to the January 14 departure of Tunisia’s Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the group was suspected in six attacks targeting security officials, killing 19 people. As Yemeni protests gained traction the following month, AQAP was suspected of involvement in five attacks in the provinces of Abyan and Mareb, killing seven. In the remainder of February, as protests throughout the country swelled to their largest numbers, three further AQAP attacks claimed three lives. While the number of deaths has declined, the better indicator of organizational ability, the number of staged attacks, remained largely unchanged.

In the aftermath of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, scholars argued that should those countries build transparent democratic governments and create opportunities for the growing middle classes, they may provide a potent antidote to Islamic extremism. By increasing their citizens' stake in the system, Tunisia and Egypt may be able to lessen the appeal of extremist groups by providing alternatives. But those countries have robust economies that have the potential to improve the quality of life of their peoples. As President Salih frequently says these days, "Yemen is not Tunisia. Yemen is not Egypt."

To compare, Egypt's 2010 GDP is estimated at \$500 billion, Tunisia's at \$100 billion and Yemen's at \$60 billion. Yemen has more than double the population of Tunisia, and according to the director of economic integration at the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), is facing economic collapse within two years (al-Sahwa, January 13).

Whether democratic reforms come from the current government or the next, the continuing frailty of Yemen's economy and diminishing oil and water reserves means such reforms will pose little threat to AQAP. Regardless of who is at the helm of the country, Yemen will not soon be in a position to offer a drastically better future to Yemenis, 35% of whom are unemployed and 40% of whom live below the poverty line.

Given that a potential revolution is unlikely to drastically change the environment in which AQAP operates in the short term, its silence on the events unfolding in Yemen today appears to be part of a strategy for growth tomorrow.

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Note:

1. Author's interview with Shaykh Abdullah al-Jumaili, Sana'a, February 21.

The Case of the Iranian Warships and the Suez Canal

By Nima Adelkhab

Late last week two Iranian warships made the return trip through the Suez Canal after raising a storm of controversy by their transit through the Canal and their visit to a Syrian port in the Mediterranean. Iranian authorities announced the successful completion of the flotilla's mission in the Mediterranean, while Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, responding to Israeli and American concerns over their mission, declared, "The Zionist regime and other enemies could not take any actions against us whatsoever" (IRNA, March 5; Press TV, March 5). The ships are slated to continue their mission by providing security for shipping in the Red Sea.

The controversy began on February 17, when the Egyptian military agreed to the safe passage of two Iranian warships through the strategic Suez water route for the first time since Iran's 1979 revolution (IRNA February 18; Sharq al-Wasat, February 18). According to Iranian state media, the 1,500-ton frigate Alvand, armed with torpedoes and Chinese-designed anti-ship missiles, and the British-built 33,000-ton supply ship Khark, with 250 crewmembers and the capacity to carry three helicopters, were on a year-long training assignment in a collaborative mission with the Syrian navy (Press TV, February 22). Alvand, a British-built Vosper Mark V frigate commissioned in 1971, is the flagship of the Iranian Navy.

The ongoing mission, according to Tehran, is a peaceful one. While abiding by international law, the naval operation aims to strengthen relations with other allies in the region, particularly Syria where the ships docked at Latakia, the nation's main port (Press TV, February 28; Fars News, February 28). Moreover, Iran's Deputy Army Commander Brigadier General Adbul-Rahim Mousavi stated that the naval operation was meant to display, especially to Israel, that Iran maintains the strongest army and naval power in the region, saying, "The Zionist regime was shocked by the presence of Iran's naval ships in the Suez Canal" (IRNA, February 23; Press TV, February 23). Aside from the propaganda, what are the military capabilities of the warships? What were Iran's foreign policy reasons for such a mission?

This was not the first time Iran has sent its warships into international waters. Since 2009, Iran has deployed six warships to global seas, including the Gulf of Aden and Sea of Oman, to demonstrate its military capability “in confronting any foreign threat on the country’s shores,” according to Admiral Sayyari (ISNA, May 14, 2009; for other Iranian naval operations, see Terrorism Monitor Briefs, October 1, 2009; Terrorism Monitor July 29, 2010). The objective of most of these naval operations has been to prevent sea piracy against Iranian commercial vessels, particularly oil tankers, though they also appear to be connected to the major changes underway in the Middle East (Haaretz, January 14, 2009; Press TV, January 23; Fars News, January 26).

Only two weeks before the transit of the Iranian ships, Iran’s Brigadier General Mousavi had urged his Egyptian military counterparts to make an historic decision to model their actions on the Iranian airmen who helped overthrow the Shah’s regime in 1979 (Press TV, February 5). With the fall of the Mubarak regime, which maintained a close relationship with Israel for over 30 years, and the political transformation sweeping across the Arab world, the Islamic Republic has found new opportunities to re-assert its regional influence, and the first ostensible shift of relations appears to be between Egypt and Iran.

The situation posed a major diplomatic challenge for Egypt’s military-led government, as it hopes to remain an ally of the United States and also uphold its peace treaty with the Israel, a country that views Iran as an existential threat to its security. Earlier last month, the Egyptian Ministry of Defense, which has been largely in charge of the country’s decision-making as of late, made a public statement that it cannot prevent passage in the Suez Canal to any country unless Egypt is in a state of war with that country (al-Jazeera, February 16). While the army is busy creating new amendments to the constitution and preparing for upcoming elections that would enable the country to move beyond the Mubarak era, the army-led government also appears to shy away from any conflict that could arise from the passage of Iranian warships. For the most part, Iran knows Egypt’s vulnerability and has exploited the situation with the navy’s Suez passage.

From the Israeli perspective, however, the Egyptian decision signals the end of a three-decade partnership that now finds Egypt a principal supplier of natural gas to Israel (Haaretz, February 18). According to the Israeli foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, the

presence of the Iranian warships in the Mediterranean was a clear act of provocation (al-Arabiya, February 18). As Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described it, Iran is opportunistically seeking to take advantage of the current instability in the Arab world and extend its influence in the region (Press TV, February 28). In many ways, the passage of the ships portends a possible war between Israel and Iran, and the Iranian naval operation marks a new strategic phase in the region following the Arab uprisings.

In reality, however, the Iranian ships served a mostly symbolic presence, perhaps as a warning to Israel and the U.S. against a possible attack on its nuclear facilities. Despite the fact that the two aging ships are no match for the American and Israeli navies and lack the ability to launch air attacks, the mere presence of these vessels can help Tehran display Iran’s military presence in a region undergoing political instability and unrest.

Tehran’s apparent attempt to flex its muscle amidst the turmoil in the Middle East is not merely designed to expand its sphere of regional influence, but perhaps more importantly, to exert influence over a brewing crisis on the domestic level. Since Iran’s decision to deploy ships was made before the uprisings that have now engulfed the region, it is possible that the display of naval operation was in fact intended to bolster state power and incite nationalist sentiment in Iran to enable the regime to regain legitimacy after the political unrest that followed the disputed presidential election of 2009. The foreign policy reason for Iran’s latest naval operation is therefore designed for an increasingly skeptical domestic audience and only to a lesser extent for regional strategic purposes.

Nima Adelkhah is an independent analyst based in New York. His current research agenda includes the Middle East, military strategy and technology, and nuclear proliferation among other defense and security issues.

The Libyan Battle for the Heritage of Omar al-Mukhtar, the “Lion of the Desert”

Andrew McGregor

Beyond the battle for the towns and cities of Libya, there is another battle raging over the legacy of Sidi Omar al-Mukhtar, Libya’s “Lion of the Desert.” The symbol of Libyan nationalism and pride, the inheritance of this stalwart of the Islamic and anti-colonial struggle against Italian fascism has been cited as the inspiration of both the Qaddafi regime and the rebels who oppose it. Al-Mukhtar’s heritage is also cited by the foreign Islamists who would seek to influence events in Libya.

Omar al-Mukhtar and the Roman Riconquista

An Islamic scholar turned guerrilla fighter, Omar al-Mukhtar was a member of the Minifa, a tribe of Arabized Berbers. Educated in the schools of the powerful Sanusi Sufi order, al-Mukhtar joined the Sanusi resistance to the Italian invasion of Libya in 1911. Unable to control little more than the coastal strip, the Italians turned to a series of treaties in an effort to expand their presence in the interior. These accords were abrogated when the fascists came to power in Italy in 1922. In the following year Mussolini’s forces embarked on the riconquista, the ruthless “reconquest” of the ancient Roman colonies of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Drawing on his experience fighting both Italians and British under Sayyid Ahmad al-Sharif al-Sanusi, al-Mukhtar organized the armed resistance in Cyrenaica and launched an eight year campaign against Italian rule using the slogan “We will win or die!” Combining lightning raids and widespread popular support, al-Mukhtar was soon in control of what Libyans referred to as “the nocturnal government.” Fascist forces responded with ever growing levels of brutality designed to eliminate support for the rebels. A 200-mile-long barbed wire fence was built along the Egyptian border to cut the resistance off from supporters in Egypt and Sudan. The Sanusis, already compromised by the deals they had made with the Italians, quickly folded under the pressure, leaving al-Mukhtar as the de facto leader of the anti-colonial Islamic resistance. A social transformation accompanied the desert uprising as the Murabtin (tribes of Arabized Berbers) grew more prominent through their leadership of the resistance in relation to the traditional Sa’adi Arab elite formed from

the descendants of the 11th century Arab Bani Hillal conquerors of North Africa. [1] Finally, in a battle with the Italians in September 1931, al-Mukhtar was pinned beneath his fallen horse, wounded and eventually captured.

Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, the leader of the Italian military forces, came from Rome to question the resistance leader before his execution. He asked al-Mukhtar if he really believed he could win a war against the Italians, to which the unyielding al-Mukhtar replied: “War is a duty for us and victory comes from God.” [2] Al-Mukhtar was executed before an estimated 20,000 fellow Libyans and within a year Italian forces had trapped the remaining resistance leaders against the barrier with Egypt. By the time Italian rule came to an end in Libya in 1943, nearly 50% of Libya’s population had been starved, killed or forced into exile.

The little known but horrific methods used in the riconquista foreshadowed the methods of extermination practiced in the Second World War; the bombing of civilians and livestock, poisoning of wells, thousands of public hangings, the use of poison gas, prisoners thrown out of airplanes and the establishment of vast concentration camps where Libyans were sent to die of starvation and illness by the tens of thousands. Graziani felt little remorse for his tactics, but did lament “the clamor of unpopularity and slander and disparagement which was spread everywhere against me.” [3]

Though al-Mukhtar had emerged as a national hero, his memory was suppressed by the Sanusi royalty that ruled Libya from independence in 1951 to the time of their overthrow in 1969. As Qaddafi and the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) claimed his legacy, Omar al-Mukhtar’s name and image suddenly became ubiquitous in Libya. Roads were named for him, his image appeared on Libyan currency, a center was formed for the study of the Libyan jihad and the government financed a 1981 movie, “Lion of the Desert,” in which Anthony Quinn played al-Mukhtar and Oliver Reed portrayed a menacing Marshal Graziani. While the film was shown regularly on Libyan state television, it was banned in Italy until its first broadcast on Italian TV in 2009.

A Hero to Mu’ammar Qaddafi

From the time of the 1969 military coup that brought Mu’ammar Qaddafi and the other members of the RCC to power, Libya’s “Guide” has told listeners that his childhood hero was Omar al-Mukhtar and that

his father, Abu Minyar, had fought under al-Mukhtar against the Italians (though the latter claim is disputed – see Arab Times, March 4). Like al-Mukhtar, Qaddafi was also a member of a Murabtin tribe, the Qaddafa.

Qaddafi's efforts to identify himself with al-Mukhtar's legacy began almost immediately. His first public speech as Libya's new leader came on September 16, 1969 – the anniversary of al-Mukhtar's execution – and was delivered in front of al-Mukhtar's tomb in Benghazi. In the address, Qaddafi emphasized the need to continue the struggle for “national liberation.” However, Qaddafi's focus on pan-Arab unity led only three months later to the first coup attempt against his regime by factions more interested in a focus on democracy and development.

Nevertheless, Qaddafi has continued to call on al-Mukhtar's legacy to validate his regime, frequently referring to Libyans as “followers” of Omar al-Mukhtar, reinforcing a shared heritage of anti-colonialism designed to support Qaddafi's own anti-Western policies. [4] In recent speeches, such as the bizarre address of February 21, Qaddafi has continued to represent himself as the heir of Omar al-Mukhtar. On February 25, Qaddafi told followers in Tripoli's Green Square: “You are the enthusiastic youth of the [Green] revolution. You see pride and dignity in the revolution. You see history and glory in revolution - it is the jihad of the heroes. It is the revolution that gave birth to Omar al-Mukhtar” (al-Jazeera, February 25).

Despite Qaddafi's occasional efforts to channel the spirit of Omar al-Mukhtar for his own benefit, he would most probably have been opposed by the former Qu'ranic teacher al-Mukhtar when he described his own view of jihad to a 1980 gathering:

To be engaged in the battle of jihad today is better than the worship of a thousand years of egotistical litanies of praise and penitent devotion. Islam is the religion of power, of challenge, of steadfastness and of jihad. It behooves us, therefore, to scatter our prayer beads if they were to keep our hands away from arms. We should put our copies of the Qu'ran on the shelf if they were to distract us from implementing its teachings. [5]

Libyan rebels have actively challenged Qaddafi's claims to be the inheritor of al-Mukhtar's legacy, particularly in eastern Libya, the Cyrenaican homeland of al-Mukhtar

and his Islamic resistance. Rebel fighters in Benghazi were recently observed marching through the streets shouting the slogan used by al-Mukhtar's forces, “We will win or die!” (BBC, March 4).

The Islamists Call on Omar al-Mukhtar

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) was quick to make its own use of Omar al-Mukhtar's legacy, releasing a statement entitled “In Defense and Support of the Revolution of Our Fellow Free Muslims, the Progeny of Omar al-Mukhtar” (al-Andalus Media Foundation, February 23).

The message praises the “honorable revolt against the taghut [an unjust ruler who relies on laws other than those revealed by Allah] of Libya, the modern Musaylimah [i.e. a false prophet], who has made the progeny of Omar al-Mukhtar taste 40 years of suppression, crime and humiliation... The continual massacres which the modern Musaylimah is committing through the use of African mercenaries and fighter jets against the Libyan people clearly exposes that these ruling tawagheet [pl. of taghut] are more than ready to kill Muslims and eradicate them to preserve their thrones.” The comparison with Musaylimah, a rival prophet to Muhammad who was killed by the forces of Caliph Abu Bakr at the Battle of Yamama (632 CE), is based on the 1975 release of Qaddafi's al-Kitab al-Ar (Green Book), which was widely perceived in Islamic circles as a presumptuous rival to the holy Qu'ran.

Amidst much invective directed towards Qaddafi, whose brutal methods destroyed Libya's own radical Islamist movement, AQIM declares it is with the rebels and will not desert them; “We will spend whatever we have to help you.” Though there are as of yet no indications that AQIM has fulfilled these pledges or intends to honor them in any way, the movement describes the revolt in Libya as a “jihad” and encourages the rebels to use the motto of “the Shaykh of the Mujahideen, Omar al-Mukhtar: ‘We will never surrender! We will either gain victory or die!’”

Fresh from a triumphant return to his native Egypt in the wake of the Lotus Revolution, influential Qatar-based Muslim Brother and TV Preacher Yusuf al-Qaradawi issued a fatwa (religious ruling) permitting Libyans to “put a bullet in Qaddafi's head” and called on “the grandsons of Omar al-Mukhtar” to continue fighting until Libya was returned to its Arab and Islamic roots (al-Jazeera, February 21; al-Masry al-Youm, February 22).

However, the London-based Egyptian Salafist and al-Qaeda supporter, Dr. Hani al-Siba'i, accused al-Qaradawi in his Friday sermon of having been a friend of Gaddafi until recently, describing the rebels as the descendants of Omar al-Mukhtar, "whom we consider a martyr at the hands of the Italian criminals" (al-Ansar1.info, February 25).

A member of Qaradawi's Islam Online editorial team elaborated on the rebels' connection to Omar al-Mukhtar, describing them as the "descendants of the freedom fighter Omar al-Mukhtar... famous for his saying, "I believe in my right to freedom, and my country's right to life, and this belief is stronger than any weapon." The writer made a subtle tie between Qaddafi and the Italian imperialists who hung al-Mukhtar and thousands of others, pointing to Qaddafi's use of a public gallows, from which "the bodies of the opposition to his 'revolution' hung from the nooses" (Islam Online, February 23).

Conclusion

The record of Italian rule in Libya is the basis of today's rejection of foreign military intervention on the ground by both the loyalist and rebel camps. After leading the first Friday prayers since dislodging the regime in Benghazi, a local imam supporting the rebels warned: "We do not want any foreign military intervention. If they try to intervene, Omar Mukhtar will come forth again" (AFP, February 24).

Perhaps the last word in the debate over Omar al-Mukhtar's legacy should go to his 90-year-old son, Muhammad Omar, who has taken a position in favor of democracy and in opposition to the visions of both al-Qaeda and al-Qaddafi, saying his father "would have a similar position to mine for the benefit of the country." Asked what advice he would offer the embattled leader, Muhammad Omar replied: "He doesn't listen to advice. A lot of people try to advise him but he still has a hard head and he doesn't want to listen." Al-Mukhtar's son described Qaddafi's killing of civilians as "appalling... nobody expected him to behave like this" (Irish Times, March 2; al-Arabiya, February 27).

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Notes:

1. Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya: State Formation, Colonization, and Resistance*, 2nd ed., New York, 2009.
2. Tahir al-Zawi: 'Umar al-Mukhtar, Tripoli, 1970, p.84.
3. David Blundy and Andrew Lycett, *Qaddafi and the Libyan Revolution*, London, 1987, p.37.
4. Dirk Vandewalle, *Libya Since Independence*, London, 1998, p.130.
5. Quoted in Mahmoud Ayoub, *Islam and the Third Universal Theory: The Religious Thought of Mu'ammarr al-Qadhafi*, London, 1987, pp. 133-34.