


Reflections on Jihad: A Former Leader's Perspective

An In-depth Conversation with Noman Benotman

By Frank J. Cilluffo and F. Jordan Evert

October 16, 2009



While many counterterrorism experts pay much attention to the tactics and modus operandi of specific organizations in an effort to defeat them, al-Qaeda, its franchises, and like-minded groups tap into a much broader narrative that inspires and shapes their operations. The thinking of former members of al-Qaeda and associated groups provides a unique window into this narrative.

In the past few years, many key figures have renounced violent jihadist ideology, including members of the Egyptian al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya; Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (Dr. Fadl), former Emir in the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, whose ideology is at the core of al-Qaeda's thinking; militants from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and across Southeast Asia; and most recently, the leadership of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank write [here](#) about the impact of such efforts, featuring specifically the story of Noman Benotman (profiled with other former militants in Salon [here](#)).

Noman Benotman was a core member of the LIFG, an Islamist organization that for decades dedicated itself to the overthrow of Muammar Qadhafi. At one point, Benotman served as a member of LIFG's governing Shura Committee. In many ways, his ideological background is similar to that of al-Qaeda's senior leadership. He too fought in Afghanistan and even advised Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri on strategy.

In the summer of 2000, Benotman traveled as the LIFG representative to a gathering of jihadists from across the Arab world convened by bin Laden in Kandahar, Afghanistan. It was at this time that Benotman began to break with al-Qaeda's leaders over differences in opinion about strategy.

At first the break was private. Benotman warned bin Laden that a jihad against the United States would backfire. In November 2007 however, the break became public. In an [open letter to al-Zawahiri](#), Benotman argued that al-Qaeda's tactics violated Islam's call for the protection of "man's religion, life, mind, off-spring, and wealth." He called on the organization to declare a unilateral cessation of military operations.

During this timeframe, Benotman also met with HSPI Director Frank Cilluffo to share initial thoughts on many of the issues discussed in depth in the detailed interview below.

Also in November 2007, al-Zawahiri and Abu Laith al-Liby (who claimed to be speaking on behalf of LIFG) announced in an audio recording that LIFG was formally merging into the larger al-Qaeda network. The validity of this merger remains unclear, as is the question of who truly speaks for LIFG—a topic that Evan Kohlmann's entry on Counterterrorism Blog addresses [here](#).

The issue resurfaced this summer, when a group of authors writing under the name “Islamic Fighting Group – Britain” [issued a communiqué on July 3, 2009](#) nullifying LIFG’s membership in al-Qaeda. The authors argue that al-Liby acted without the consent of LIFG’s leadership. Furthermore, they publically criticize al-Qaeda for its “wrongful practices like random bombings, destroying private and public property, and targeting civilians.”

In August 2009, it was announced that LIFG members were preparing to issue the *Book of Correctional Studies* (al-kitab al-dirasat al-tashihiyya) [in Arabic [here](#)]. The book serves as a lengthy refutation of al-Qaeda’s jihadist ideology. The Libyan daily Oea has been rolling out sections of the book in serialized form. The UK’s [Quilliam Foundation](#) has released a [selected translation of the text](#), and Jihadica has provided [some initial analysis of the text](#). It is also worth noting that in 2008, on his first visit to the United States, Quilliam Foundation Director Maajid Nawaz [spoke at the Homeland Security Policy Institute \(HSPI\)](#) on the topic of countering violent jihadism.

Correctional Studies was authored chiefly by Emir Abdullah al Sadeq, the LIFG’s leader, and Abu Munder al-Saidi, the group’s spiritual leader. The theological challenge posed by the book has the potential to embarrass, undermine, and isolate al-Qaeda (and its network of violent Islamists) from their target audience of prospective supporters.

One prominent co-author, Abdul Wahhab al-Qaid (Abu Idris), is a former LIFG leader and the older brother of Abu Yahya al-Liby. Al-Liby is the spiritual leader of [al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb](#) (AQIM), who seems to be increasingly positioning himself as successor to bin Laden. What makes al-Liby quite dangerous is that he has a religious pedigree that bin Laden and al-Zawahiri lack. In turn, what makes Abu Idris so compelling is his denunciation of al-Liby. Jarret Brachman has contributed valuable thinking on both of these subjects (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

Hoping to shed further light on these new developments as well as other related topics, HSPI posed a series of in-depth questions to Benotman. Topics included the impact of the July 3rd communiqué and *Correctional Studies* on al-Qaeda’s ability to keep supporters and recruit new followers; conceptions of legitimate jihad; the governing structure of LIFG; the process of transitioning from an al-Qaeda ally to open critic; and strategies for resolving the conflict in Afghanistan. For their candor and insight, Benotman’s responses are a valuable resource for policymakers, practitioners, and academics alike.

--

How was the decision to release the July 3rd communiqué reached? Was there a particular event or set of criteria that precipitated this decision?

It was a very difficult decision because of the absence of charismatic, powerful leadership, so all these people had to cooperate based on open dialogue. There are some key figures who played a significant role to galvanise support to get individuals to agree with the dialogue between the government and the LIFG. One of the main factors that encouraged these people to release the communiqué was their conclusion that the process of dialogue had reached its final stage.

Two important measures convinced them to support the dialogue. First, they were certain that the group and its leaders in prison were acting based on their free will. Second, the Libyan Government was seriously committed to dialogue and reconciliation.

In November 2007, Al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri along with Abu Laith al-Liby announced with great fanfare that LIFG had merged with Al-Qaeda, yet in the communiqué it states Abu Laith al-Liby did so on his own and without "approval of most members in the Shura Majlis." Can you expand upon this statement? How is LIFG governed? Have the rules for decision-making changed over time? What insights can you provide on Abu Yahya al-Liby, now one of the leaders of AQIM and also a current or former member of LIFG?

The decision to dismantle the group, or merge with another group, or even to change its name, is an organizational decision that no individual in the LIFG leadership has the right to make on his own. The LIFG in its constitution puts these kinds of decisions in the hands of the shura council members collectively. Not even the leader of the group has the power or the authority to make organizational decisions regarding the group. That's why Abu Laith's decision does not represent the group and is illegitimate.

The LIFG constitution specifies its governing structure of committees, departments, and authorities, as well as the nature of the relationships between the parts of the group. The constitution has developed over the years. Since the early-90s, the shura council discusses and reviews the constitution as part of the agenda for every general meeting.

Abu Yahya al-Liby (Hassan Gayid) has not announced his resignation from the group directly because of his loyalty to the group and its leadership. Because of the circumstances surrounding him, he decided with other individuals to subscribe to the al-Qaeda network. This action from the LIFG point of view means he is no longer a member of the group—its automatic dis-membership.

The bottom line is that Abu Yahya al-Liby is a significant part of the Al-Qaeda leadership, not just in AQIM, but in the whole network worldwide he is the most influential and spiritual figure so far. In the future, for him the sky is the limit to be the top Jihadi theorist worldwide, but I am not sure he can make it as bin Laden's successor, as some reports have mentioned.

What strategic impact do you think the July communiqué will have? Upon Al-Qaeda specifically? How about upon al-Qaeda's narrative, "brand," and strength? Do you think the effects will vary among Muslim populations living in the Arab world and those living in the West and elsewhere? The communiqué is signed "Islamic Fighting Group – Britain." Are the authors vulnerable to charges that they do not represent the majority of LIFG members?

The communiqué by itself has no impact on the strategic level, despite its importance in encouraging and supporting the LIFG members and leadership in prison to keep doing good work and to reach the final destination of the dialogue between the group and the government. The communiqué will deny anyone in the future the opportunity or the possibility to try to re-group and re-organise for another round of struggle based on violence.

The real strategic impact will come from the recently released book, "Corrective Studies in Understanding Jihad, Accountability, and the Judgment of the People," written by six members of the LIFG leadership, including Abdullah Sadik, the leader of the group, and Abu Munder Saidi, the spiritual leader of the group.

This new book is the fruit of the dialogue between the government and the LIFG that started in January 2007. A lot of Arab national daily newspapers started running series of this book, including papers in Libya, Algeria, and Jordan. I think this book, if it is compounded with the release of the approximately 200 LIFG members in prison, will have much more strategic effect. The most important strategic impact for the 478-page book is not that it has pragmatically denounced violence, but that it has ideologically de-legitimised violence.

What are the hallmarks of legitimate jihad? When is it permissible and under what circumstances? How sound are Al-Qaeda's theological underpinnings? Do you believe that their ideology should be further theologically challenged by Islamic scholars and other jihadist leaders? What are Al-Qaeda's greatest strengths? What are their greatest weaknesses? If they continue down the path they have pursued, what is their future?

Discussing what is legitimate Jihad and what is not is one of the most difficult and complex issues facing all Muslims worldwide and the rest of the intellectuals and thinkers in the West. Despite all that I would like to say, the most important thing is the framework and the approach to discuss arguing, theorising, and conceptualising Jihad.

From my point of view, I would like to say taking in account the religious text in the Quran and authentic Hadeeth (saying of the prophet) in the twenty-first century is not just a Muslim issue despite it being one of the Muslim duties in specific circumstances, but it's an issue affecting the whole world because here we talk about war and peace. That's why I strongly believe that the departure point arguing about legitimate Jihad should be approached from an international relations studies point of view. That means when we are theorising and analysing Jihad we take in account our contemporary world, which is significantly different from various historical phases in the past.

My point is Muslims should theorise and understand Jihad (war and peace) based on the contemporary phase. That is why I believe the departure point is international relations studies, so we can utilise the knowledge compilation developed by humanity to discuss how to regulate, control, and establish laws and rules for war.

What I've said makes Al-Qaeda's theological underpinnings unrelative and unstable, because Al-Qaeda heavily depends on two elements. First, a mechanical understanding from ideas, concepts, and visions written hundreds of years ago. So I can say Al-Qaeda understands and theorises our modern life through glasses made thousands of years ago. Second, the imbalance of power between Muslim countries and the West, which is one of the main sources contributing to Muslim weakness, fragmentation, underdevelopment, and grievances.

Al-Qaeda poses serious threats not to the West only but to the Muslim countries as well. If it's killing thousands of Westerns and Non-Muslims worldwide, it is doing the same thing in the Muslim countries, plus high-jacking Islam itself. So an ideological confrontation between Al-Qaeda and Muslim scholars, intellectuals, and thinkers is inevitable to uncover and de-legitimise terrorism, extremism, and radicalism, which are established as a school of thought in terms of understanding and having a strategy to act in the name of Islam.

In the last nine years, you've transitioned from being an al-Qaeda ally, to sincere critic, to a position of open dissent – why?

The bottom line is I am a politician. I have dreams, hopes, and vision. Taking that in account, my agenda dictating who is my Ally and who is not. And during the period of the Soviet's invasion in Afghanistan, all the parties who shared the same objective of

Reflections on Jihad: Benotman | Page 5

defeating the Empire of Evil (The Soviet Union) were one way or another allies despite the differences between all of them. And Al-Qaeda 20 years ago was completely different from the Al-Qaeda of today. I strongly believe all Muslims should criticise and resist Al-Qaeda attempts to hi-jack the Islamic agenda, in both levels domestic and international.

When you joined LIFG, what was your concept of the movement? What were your hopes and goals in Libya; in Afghanistan; and for Islamic communities around the world?

I never ever believed that the LIFG is the Muslim nation or the Libyan society. It's just a group of Muslims who believe that Libyan society constitutes 100% of Muslims who have the right to establish and build a Nation State based on Sharia law. And the LIFG can act as driver, catalyst, and vanguard to speed up the process of transforming the Libyan society to the Islamic version.

Our goal in Afghanistan was achieved, which was to defeat the enemy, liberate the whole country from communism, and help the Mujahideen to take over the governance of Afghanistan. Since then the LIFG quit fighting, and it didn't take any part in the civil war between yesterday's Mujahideen and today's Rulers. Even during the period of the Taliban the LIFG took no part in the fight against the other groups, and it was a Shura decision.

Regarding the communities in the Islamic world, we are as individuals in the Islamic fighting group the LIFG. We have our individual hopes and sketchy visions for the Muslim nation worldwide, but the group itself, LIFG, has no agenda regarding that issue because it's been built based on National Struggle. This despite the cooperation between the LIFG and other Muslim groups in other places of the world, but that's a normal response to given circumstances, not based on political agenda intentionally being developed.

What motivated LIFG and the Libyan government to engage in peace talks in recent years? What is the current status of these discussions? What lessons can be learned from this process?

I have to say the idea and the initiative was launched by Saif Islam Al-Qadafi, Colonel Muamer Al-Qadafi's son, in December 2007. Because I was in the heart of that process since its launch, I can say without a doubt that Saif Al-Islam himself was the main driver and the power house for its sure success. And the LIFG, when they knew that Saif Al-Islam was sponsoring the initiative, they showed no hesitation to accept the window of opportunity to engage in the process of peace talks.

And I think due to the circumstances surrounding the group, when the initiative was launched it did motivate the group to engage. Most of the group had been arrested, including six of the leaders. At this time there was also the dominance of the Al-Qaeda-like style of Jihad, which is based on stray, blind violence. So the group was in a position to think and reflect about their experience and to come to a conclusion about the use of violence and the negative impact imposed by Radical Islam Ideology to the future of Islam itself. And here I can say I am quoting them because they have told me that in person in 2007, during one of my visits to the prison when we were in the middle of peace talks.

As for the current status, I can say we've reached the final destination, thank god successfully, because the group issued their new book [*Correctional Studies*] which delegitimises the use of terrorism and violence. And now we are waiting for the final move from the government to start the process of releasing all of them, taking in account the security measures and precautions. There are many lessons one can take from this process, but the most important one is sometimes we face problems which appear to be unsolvable because our minds have been set by default. And when we start to think of the unthinkable we find that those unsolvable problems are actually solvable, and the main problem was our way of thinking, not the problem itself.

Is complete reconciliation possible?

Yes of course.

In your November 2007 open letter to Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, you urge al-Qaeda to take a more inclusive approach and return to “mainstream” Islam. What are the tenets of mainstream Islam? Can al-Qaeda ever really support it?

This is one of the main problematic and debatable issues, mainstream Islam. And that is because the political presence of the Muslim nation, the Caliph, does not exist anymore. So we don't have a political entity we can identify as the Muslim nation. The current existence of the Muslim nation is at the faithful level—people sharing the same faith, belief, and creed. But they are divided into about 55 independent sovereign countries, plus dozens of Muslim communities in non Muslim States.

Taking that in account imagine how difficult it is to identify mainstream Islam in this plural sphere, despite all I can say about the fact that throughout the history of the Muslim nation—since its existence over 1500 years ago—the Sunni School of thought always is the dominant power and force representing mainstream Islam. Our problem here is Al-Qaeda itself. Its point of departure is between the Sunni sect of Islam and the

Salafist Ideology, but public opinion and the vast majority of the Muslim Sunni worldwide reject and do not accept Al-Qaeda's understanding or interpretation of Islam.

The main three different points here between Al-Qaeda and the Sunni sect of Islam are:


- First; the issue of loyalty. Al-Qaeda practically transformed this concept from its traditional understanding—which is that all Muslims are loyal to each other—to the notion that all Muslims should be loyal to Al-Qaeda and if you're not, that means there is something wrong with your faith, belief, and creed, and you may end up being identified as a non Muslim from Al-Qaeda's point of view. This understanding is one of the main sources of bad and sometimes evil reactions committed by Al-Qaeda members.
- Second; their understanding of Jihad, which has been transformed from ethical and moral action based on justice to be nonsense terrorist activities.
- Third; traditionally Muslim leaders are of two characters. One is people with authority and power, like presidents, kings, and princes. They are the source of political legitimacy. The other is people who have the moral power, the Scholars (Ulama), and they are the source of religious legitimacy. Traditionally this is the structure of power in the Muslim society.

I myself am asking here where does Al-Qaeda fit in these categories, taking in account that they claim to represent the whole Muslim nation, including launching a global war against many different nations on behalf of the Muslim nation.

What salience does the new field manual “Rules for Mujahideen” have for operations and with Islamic communities? What effect will it have on Islamist operations themselves or the perceptions of such?

Let me first describe the manual itself. It's not an ideological or theological argument or thesis about Jihad, so my point of view is I believe it's an administrative reaction from the Taliban movement to certain circumstances. In different words, they believe they've entered a new phase a little bit more advanced than the previous one, and if you see the manual itself, which is more than 60 pages, it's all about how to control and run areas under their control. There are many other articles in the manual which we can describe as a code of conduct and rules of engagement.

According to what has been mentioned, its impact outside of Afghanistan will be insignificant, if that. Just if you look at Algeria, Iraq, and now Somalia, all Jihadists are still active in these areas based on their old rules, which were mentioned in the manual released on May 9th, 2009. Take for example kidnapping for ransom, which is strictly



prohibited according to the manual, but is still part of the Jihad in Algeria, Somalia and Iraq.

Do you continue to believe al-Qaeda should cease its military operations (both in the Arab world and in the West), and focus its operations on the battle in Afghanistan?

Yes I still believe Al-Qaeda should cease military operations both in the Arab world and in the West. Regarding Afghanistan, I don't think Al-Qaeda has the right to develop their own agenda to benefit from the conflict at the cost of the Afghan people and Taliban themselves. So if they decide to stay or to stand the course with Taliban, they should participate within the Taliban framework and based on their rules, because we know in the past that Al-Qaeda is fully responsible for bringing this war to Afghanistan. And I believe it is the right time for Al-Qaeda as an organisation to revise and judge their ideology, strategy and tactic based on their own experience. And if they keep repeating the slogan with doing this for the sake of our nation only, I would like to ask them, 'Does your nation really want/need you?'. And the reality is that you've imposed yourself on your nation.

What ought to be done for the people of Afghanistan – by countries in the Islamic world and those in the West? Are there avenues and opportunities for cooperation in stabilizing and rebuilding the Afghan state?

There are two ways of answering this question. The first one is in a typical politician's style, offering fine words but little action to satisfy a specific audience. The second one is transforming leadership—making things happen through conflict like Franklin D. Roosevelt and his historical shift from Dr. New Deal to Dr. Win-the-War. I will try to make some points based on the second rather than the first.

There are always opportunities to stabilise and rebuild Afghanistan, but the problem is that we need some luck and a lot of skill to explore those opportunities. We have to understand two fundamental issues to start to think about stabilising and rebuilding Afghanistan. First, we are the world facing multi-dimensional challenges of building peace in Afghanistan. Second, rebuilding Afghanistan should be prioritized towards the top of the international political and security agenda.

The immediate challenge in Afghanistan is its still in the conflict phase, so we should urgently develop strategy to take it to the next phase, which is the post-conflict phase.

As long as we are still stuck in the conflict phase, it's going to be extremely difficult to rebuild the state, to stabilize it, and to deliver peace and security. And that strategy should be formulated based on one reality: The Afghanisation of the Conflict.

Reflections on Jihad: Benotman | Page 9

And here if I may refer to the [distinguished article in Foreign Affairs magazine, July-August issue, titled 'Flipping the Taliban,' written by Fotini Christia and Michael Semple](#). Changing sides, realigning, flipping is called the Afghan way of war. The missing point here is the context, and by this I mean the Afghanisation of war, people changing sides, flipping from one Afghan group to another. It's very hard to find an example that people involved in the armed struggle change sides from the resistance to the foreign occupiers or from the resistance to the government side, since the 70's if I may say – it's been the other way around.

To clarify more, if some groups of Mujahideen switch sides from Taliban to Hikmatyar, it wouldn't make any difference in the big picture because they're still fighting the same enemies. The existing president, Hamid Karzai, is expired and should leave. A new government should be formed from leaders capable of launching the process of taking Afghanistan gradually to the post-conflict phase, and it should include Mujahideen leaders who fought against the Soviet Invaders during the 80's.

Militarily, instead of the strategy aiming for a comprehensive military victory over the Taliban, another strategy should be developed based on convincing the Taliban that they can't win the war. Full responsibility and burden should move to the United Nations to sort out all the challenges from the Afghan conflict. De-link from the approach of global war on terror, which includes re-defining the Taliban movement as an indigenous national resistance movement instead of a terrorist group in order to pave the way to engage them in the near future in peace talks and in the political process. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Qatar should play a major role to the conflict resolution.

What message(s) should members of Islamic communities be hearing from their leaders (Islamic scholars, politicians, NGO's, community leaders, etc.)?

Wake up and learn how to pick yourself up out of the dust and reject the helpless state. Stop playing the role of the victim, because you are the victim of your own despair. Connect yourself with the inspiring part of Islamic identity, with values that can give you strength and hope. Try hard to open a new horizon for yourself away from radicalization and extremism, walk away from the destructive cultures and teachings of death, and start to think optimistically to a different kind life. A better future. And if under any circumstances you begin considering war, you should first stop to think of peace.

What did you think of President Obama's remarks in Cairo? What impact, if any, do you think it will have in opening up a new dialogue between the United States and Muslim communities around the world?

The problem is not about remarks in Cairo or dialogue between the United States and the Muslim communities, it's about avoiding a traditional Western approach when it comes to the Middle East (talking idealistically and acting brutally), that is if the Intellectual President Obama wants to influence the Muslim communities world wide.

--

Frank J. Cilluffo is HSPI's Director. F. Jordan Evert is a Presidential Administrative Fellow at HSPI.

Founded in 2003, The George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI) is a nonpartisan "think and do" tank whose mission is to build bridges between theory and practice to advance homeland security through an interdisciplinary approach. By convening domestic and international policymakers and practitioners at all levels of government, the private and non-profit sectors, and academia, HSPI creates innovative strategies and solutions to current and future threats to the nation.

Comments should be directed to hspi@gwu.edu. For more information on HSPI and its programs, please visit [our website](#).