

# Jerusalem issue brief



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## **Did the Libyan Leadership Deceive the West?**

Jonathan D. Halevi

- On October 23, Mustafa Abdul Jalil, Chairman of the National Transitional Council (NTC) that is the temporary power in Libya replacing the Gaddafi regime, announced: "We, as an Islamic state, determined that Islamic law is a major source for legislation, and on this basis any law which contradicts the principles of Islam and Islamic law will be considered null and void."
- The NTC has the support of the West and NATO countries, which helped it militarily to bring down the Gaddafi regime, hoping to establish a democratic regime in Libya.
- In early October, Dr. David Gerbi, who was born in Libya and fled to Italy in 1967, arrived in Tripoli and asked to repair the synagogue. The NTC was quick to remove him, while demonstrations were held in Tripoli calling to prevent any Jewish presence in Libya or the establishment of synagogues. The NTC did not condemn this expression of anti-Semitism, nor was there any objection by any other political factions in Libya.
- NTC and Western officials have already stated their growing concerns that Qatar is trying to interfere in the country's sovereignty, and the rebels are said to have received about \$2 billion from the Qatari government. Qatari involvement is likely to produce a regime in Libya that follows the political orientation of Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, thereby giving the Muslim Brotherhood an open door in the new Libya.
- The political debate in Libya will be within an essentially Islamist universe, with different leaders distinguished by the degree to which they seek to implement their Islamism. It seems that the strategy of the democratic states that trusted the promises of the rebel forces to adopt and implement the principles of democracy has collapsed, and that Western aid to overthrow Gaddafi's tyrannical regime prepared the groundwork for the establishment of an Islamic state, which eventually may become hostile to the West.

## **The Supremacy of Islamic Law**

Libya is opening a new page in its history after the execution of former leader Muammar Gaddafi. At a ceremony in Benghazi on October 23, Mustafa Abdul Jalil, Chairman of the National Transitional Council, which is the temporary power in Libya replacing the Gaddafi regime, announced the completion of the "liberation of Libya" and outlined the characteristics of the new government, which adopts Islamic law (Sharia) as a major source for legislation. That means Libya's transformation into an Islamic state.

In his victory speech, Abdul Jalil said: "We, as an Islamic state, determined that Islamic law is a major source for legislation, and on this basis any law which contradicts the principles of Islam and Islamic law will be considered null and void. As an example of such laws I will mention the law of marriage and divorce which limited polygamy. This law is contrary to Islamic law and its application is suspended." Abdul Jalil added that the new regime intends to base the banking system on legislation consistent with Islamic law that prohibits interest, which he described as fundamentally evil and corrupt. As an immediate measure to realize this intention, Abdul Jalil announced an exemption from interest for bank loans up to ten thousand dinars, and in the future, he said, interest will be cancelled completely in accordance with Islamic law.

The National Transitional Council has the support of the West and NATO countries, which helped it militarily to bring down the Gaddafi regime, hoping to establish a democratic regime in Libya. NATO's political, military, and economic support of the rebels played a decisive role in breaking the yoke of the Gaddafi regime. This included economic sanctions, military attacks on targets in Libya, enforcing a no-fly zone over Libya, and intelligence assistance.

## **The Democratic Vision of Libya**

The West's basic assumption was that the leadership of the National Transitional Council would remain faithful to its promises and commitment to the implementation of democracy in Libya, protecting human rights, and fighting terrorism. The message conveyed by the National Transitional Council was clear, as reflected in its platform published in the Council's official website. The section "The Democratic Vision of Libya" reads as follows:

The National Transitional Council presents the vision to building a democracy in Libya....There is no alternative to building a free, pluralistic and democratic society, a unified state based on the rule of law, human dignity, and protecting human rights and formation (of these rights)....We recognize without reservation our duty and our commitment as follows:

Formulation of a national constitution...keeping a civil constitutional state which will ensure ideological and political pluralism...protecting freedom of

expression...promising that the state will draw its power from the provisions of religion which teach of peace, right, justice and equality...applying a political democracy and the principles of social justice, including...

A constitutional civil state which respects the sanctity of faith and condemns fanaticism, extremism and violence...a country to which we aspire that condemns violence, terrorism, fanaticism and cultural isolation, seeing how it respects human rights and the foundations and principles of citizenship and the rights of minorities and weaker groups. Every person shall enjoy the full rights of citizenship regardless of color, sex, race or social status.

The building of a democratic Libya which bases our foreign relations and relations with regional countries on (the following principles): establishing democratic values and democratic institutions that honor our neighbors, that build partnerships and recognize the independence and sovereignty of other countries...a country which will promote the values of international justice and citizenship and will respect international humanitarian law and human rights conventions...a country that will join the international community in the opposition and condemnation of discrimination, racism and terrorism and will strongly support peace, democracy and freedom.

The National Transitional Council emphasized the words "democracy," "pluralism," "civil rights," "justice," and "equality," but their meanings in its eyes are quite different from those of the Western democracies that supported it and actually enabled its rise to power in place of Gaddafi. Like the Muslim Brotherhood, the National Transitional Council subjects "democracy" to Islamic law (Sharia), and actually drains it of its contents by stating that Islamic law is the source of legislation and that all laws that contradict it are null and void.

The declaration by Mustafa Abdul Jalil of an Islamic Libyan state was not received with any opposition from members of the National Transitional Council and the Libyan public, and it apparently expresses the dominant mood within the public, which tends to accept Islamic rule.

### **No Tolerance for Jews**

One can learn about the atmosphere on the Libyan street from the hostile and anti-Semitic public reaction to the arrival of Dr. David Gerbi in Tripoli in early October. Gerbi, who was born in Libya and fled to Italy in 1967 out of fear of harm to the Jewish community after the Six-Day War, visited the synagogue in Tripoli and asked to repair it. Upon learning of the synagogue visit, the National Transitional Council was quick to remove him from the synagogue, arguing that he was not authorized to enter the complex, which is under the authority of the Department of Archaeology. At the same time, many demonstrations were held in Tripoli calling to prevent any Jewish presence in Libya or the establishment of synagogues in the

country. The National Transitional Council did not prevent this expression of anti-Semitism and did not condemn it, nor was there any objection to this by other political factions in Libya.

## Key Islamic Figures

A central force of power in the National Transitional Council is Abdelhakim Belhadj, commander of the military forces in Tripoli who led the campaign to remove the Gaddafi regime and occupy the presidential compound in Bab al-Azizia. Belhadj, who was appointed by Mustafa Abdul Jalil, has an extensive *jihadist* background. He fought alongside the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan against Soviet forces and was a senior member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), a radical Islamic terrorist organization, which until recently held a world view rather similar to that of Al-Qaeda. The *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* newspaper reported that nearly 800 soldiers from the LIFG were involved in the fighting in Tripoli, some of them former combatants in Afghanistan and Bosnia.

In September 2010, a former leader of the LIFG and colleague of bin Laden in Afghanistan, Noman Benotman, addressed an open letter to bin Laden, calling on him and al-Qaeda to "abandon armed struggle, "stating that "Your actions have harmed millions of innocent Muslims and non-Muslims alike. How is this Islam or jihad? For how much longer will al-Qaeda continue to bring shame on Islam, disrupt ordinary Muslims' lives, and be the cause of global unrest?"<sup>1</sup>

Just a year earlier, the LIFG published a very long, revisionist document to repudiate al-Qaeda's ideology of global *jihad*. This was part of a more comprehensive deal, orchestrated by Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, who was interested in promoting his planned reforms and the leadership of the LIFG and other imprisoned Islamist groups, to release them from prison in return for their reintegration into society and abandonment of terror.<sup>2</sup> The document, however, did not mean that the LIFG was to abandon its Islamist tendency. Indeed, it was mainly endorsed by senior scholars close to the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology like Saudi Sheikh Salman al-Awdeh.

In addition to Benotman, Libyan Sheikh Ali al-Salabi, who until recently resided in Qatar, served as the intermediary between Saif al-Islam and the LIFG leadership. Salabi is a member of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS),<sup>3</sup> a global umbrella group headed by Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, the Qatar-based leader of the Muslim Brotherhood on a global scale. Even though he had no official position in Libya at the time, Salabi had already won the title of the "spiritual guide of the Libyan revolution,"<sup>4</sup> and was also described by the *New York Times* as someone who may well be the most important politician in the new Libya.<sup>5</sup>

A few weeks ago, Salabi called on the top leadership of the NTC to resign, saying that they supported the West's agenda and interest in taking control over Libya's resources.<sup>6</sup> Salabi further stated that the rebels had received about \$2 billion from the Qatari government,<sup>7</sup> and indeed, NTC and Western officials have already stated their growing concerns that Qatar is trying to interfere in the country's sovereignty, bypassing an internationally-agreed assistance

strategy for Libya to throw its support behind individuals and factions contributing to the continuing political instability.<sup>8</sup> Qatari involvement is likely to produce a regime in Libya that follows the political orientation of Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, thereby giving the Muslim Brotherhood an open door in the new Libya.

In North Africa, Libya is emerging as a very different country from Morocco or Algeria, for, unlike its neighbors, Libya is headed towards the establishment of an Islamic state. The political debate in Libya will be within an essentially Islamist universe, with different leaders distinguished by the degree to which they seek to implement their Islamism. We already can see that many of its new leaders are far from the values of democracy and human rights as understood in the West. It seems that the strategy of the democratic states that trusted the promises of the rebel forces to adopt and implement the principles of democracy has collapsed, and that Western aid to overthrow Gaddafi's tyrannical regime prepared the groundwork for the establishment of an Islamic state, which eventually may become hostile to the West.

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### Notes

1. <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/index.php/component/content/article/690>
2. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/wikileaks-files/libya-wikileaks/8294845/QADHAFI-FOUNDATION-CONTINUES-DIALOGUE-ON-RELEASE-OF-FORMER-LIBYAN-ISLAMIC-FIGHTING-GROUP-MEMBERS.html>
3. <http://www.iumsonline.us/ar/default.asp?ContentID=1039&menuID=13>
4. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2011/0903/1224303431024.html>
5. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/15/world/africa/in-libya-islamists-growing-sway-raises-questions.html?\\_r=1&ref=global-home&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/15/world/africa/in-libya-islamists-growing-sway-raises-questions.html?_r=1&ref=global-home&pagewanted=all)
6. <http://almoslim.net/node/153294>
7. <http://www.elkhabar.com/ar/monde/266747.html>
8. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/oct/04/qatar-interfering-libya>

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