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MIDDLE EAST NEWS

Ex-Mujahedeen Help Lead Libyan Rebels

By CHARLES LEVINSON

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Libyans in the eastern town of Derna shout anti-Gadhafi slogans in a protest in February. *Agence France-Presse/Getty Images*

DARNA, Libya—Two former Afghan Mujahedeen and a six-year detainee at Guantanamo Bay have stepped to the fore of this city's military campaign, training new recruits for the front and to protect the city from infiltrators loyal to Col. Moammar Gadhafi.

The presence of Islamists like these amid the opposition has raised concerns, among some fellow rebels as well as their Western allies, that the goal of some Libyan fighters in battling Col. Gadhafi is to propagate Islamist extremism.

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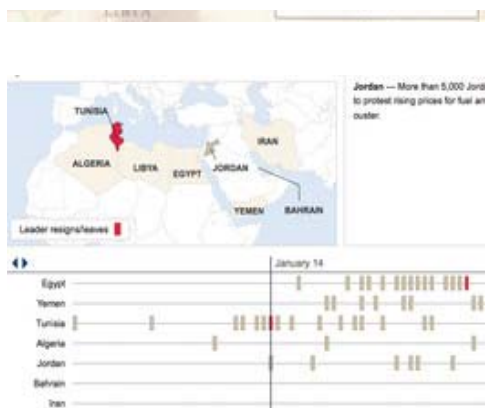


Abdel Hakim al-Hasady, an influential Islamic preacher and high-school teacher who spent five years at a training camp in eastern Afghanistan, oversees the recruitment,



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A rebel rested before leaving Ajdabiya, Libya, Friday.
Mahmud Hams/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

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Gadhafi from power.

Sufyan Ben Qumu, a Libyan army veteran who worked for Osama bin Laden's holding company in Sudan and later for an al Qaeda-linked charity in Afghanistan, is training many of the city's rebel recruits.

Both Messrs. Hasady and Ben Qumu were picked up by Pakistani authorities after the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and were turned over to the U.S. Mr. Hasady was released to Libyan custody two months later. Mr. Ben Qumu spent six years at Guantanamo Bay before he was turned over to Libyan custody in 2007.

They were both released from Libyan prisons in 2008 as part of a reconciliation with Islamists in Libya.

Islamist leaders and their contingent of followers represent a relatively small minority within the rebel cause. They have served the rebels' secular leadership with little friction. Their discipline and fighting experience is badly needed by the rebels' ragtag army.

Among his followers, Mr. Hasady has the reputation of a trained warrior who stood fearlessly at the front ranks of young protesters during the first days of the uprising.

And his discourse has become dramatically more pro-American, now that he stands in alliance with the West in a battle against Col. Gadhafi.

"Our view is starting to change of the U.S.," said Mr. Hasady. "If we hated the Americans 100%, today it is less than 50%. They have started to redeem themselves for their past mistakes by helping us to preserve the blood of our children."

Mr. Hasady also offered a reconsideration of his past approach. "No Islamist revolution has ever succeeded. Only when the whole population was included did we succeed, and that means a more inclusive ideology."

Messrs. Ben Qumu and Barrani were on the front lines and couldn't be reached for comment.

Some rebel leaders are wary of their roles. "Many of us were concerned about these people's backgrounds," said Ashour Abu Rashed, one of Darna's representatives on the rebel's provisional government body, the Transitional National Council.

"Al-Hasady told me he only wants to remove Gadhafi and will serve under the authority of the local governing councils, and so far he has been true to his word."

After the uprising began in Libya, Mr. Hasady told several journalists that he had joined the fight against the Americans during his time in Afghanistan. He now says he was misquoted and that he only settled in Afghanistan because Islamists of his ilk were unwelcome everywhere else.



For the U.S., the situation recalls the problems that followed America's ill-fated alliance with the Afghan Mujahedeen fighting the Soviets in the 1980s. Many went on to al Qaeda



and other violent radical Islamist groups.

Adm. James Stavridis, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's supreme allied commander in Europe, pointed to this concern when he told a Senate committee on

Tuesday that U.S. intelligence has picked up "flickers" of al Qaeda among rebel groups in Libya. He also said they were a minor element among the rebels.

Col. Gadhafi has gone out of his way to paint the popular uprising against his rule as an al Qaeda plot. He has singled out Mr. Hasady and the city of Darna as the capital of an alleged Islamist emirate, a baseless claim.

Local enmity for the Libyan leader runs deep. The first uprising against Col. Gadhafi's rule took place in Darna in 1970, less than a year after he seized power. The city proudly boasts that the first political prisoner killed by the Gadhafi regime was a Darna native.

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