

Pakistan

An Ally in Gitmo: the Story of Sufian bin Qumu

By [Ishaan Tharoor](#) @[ishaantharoor](#) April 25, 2011 [Add a Comment](#)

On [Battleland](#), Mark Thompson rightly says that the leaked tranche of documents detailing interrogations with detainees in Guantanamo Bay contains “no bombshells.” We’ve known for a while that methods of interrogation deployed there [were suspect](#), if not in violation of international conventions, and that dozens of inmates were seized and locked up in Gitmo on [decidedly flimsy grounds](#). The great news value of these leaked cables is, as ever, how they confirm the vagaries and inconsistencies of U.S. policy as it seeks to get to grips with real and imagined threats abroad.

Take the case of the Libyan ex-jihadi [Abu Sufian bin Qumu](#). A leaked document authored by the task force overseeing Guantanamo Bay in 2005 concluded that bin Qumu, who was transferred to Gaddafi’s notorious Busalim prison in 2007, “is a MEDIUM to HIGH risk, as he is likely to pose a threat to the US, its interests and allies.” Bin Qumu’s U.S. interrogators would have been surprised to read veteran Mideast correspondent Nicholas Pelham’s latest piece in the [New York Review of Books](#). Last month, Pelham caught up with bin Qumu in his hometown of Darnah, east of Benghazi and safe under the control of Libya’s rebels:

In a small alleyway near the town’s main bank, Sufian bin Qumu, a former Guantánamo Bay detainee, nursed his Kalashnikov, hailed the United States as a protector of the weak, and pronounced the US-led bombardment “a gift from God.”

The irony here is delicious. From a high-profile, suspected Al Qaeda operative, supposedly with considerably knowledge of terrorist networks in Central Asia and North Africa, it now seems bin Qumu’s interests and those of the U.S. are much more in accord.

For a long time, bin Qumu had less cause to be grateful to Washington. According to Pelham, bin Qumu was press-ganged into Gaddafi’s army at the age of 19, forced to fight in a brutal border war with Chad, and, after fleeing to Sudan, took up a job as a truck driver for a company owned by the Bin Laden family. That led him to show up in Pakistan and Afghanistan and apparently consort with al-Qaeda and the Taliban and run a guesthouse for Arab fighters in Peshawar. After 9/11, Pakistani forces, tipped off by Gaddafi’s agents also in the country, according to the leaked document, captured bin Qumu and turned him over to the U.S. After a number of years in Gitmo, he was transferred back to Gaddafi’s torture chambers. Pelham writes:

Every couple of months he was taken to [Gaddafi’s] external security organization headquarters in Tripoli for questioning by an American official. Bin Qumu remembers he exploded in anger when in August 2010 the official told him that Qaddafi was releasing him without charge.

The extent of cooperation between the Gaddafi regime and American agents ought not be surprising. As hundreds of leaked diplomatic cables reveal, the U.S. has long leaned on the Middle East's authoritarian governments to help it monitor potential Islamist extremists. And the region's dictators, like the now toppled Hosni Mubarak, have long used that as political leverage in justifying their rule. The leaked document refers to the possibility, likely planted by Libyan security agents, that bin Qumu is an unstable drug addict — a claim that doesn't sound so different from Gaddafi's wild accusation at the beginning of the revolt against his regime that the rebels were just a gaggle of Islamists hopped-up on LSD.

Bin Qumu and other prominent **ex-jihadis** now hold commanding positions in Darnah's new rebel government, and have organized training camps for rebel militia. **They have all denied any sympathy and support for al-Qaeda**, and like other armed Islamist movements of the past, **their rhetoric now is all about justice and liberation from tyranny**. Pelham concludes that it's more likely al-Qaeda will prosper from a Gaddafi victory — which would lead to clandestine insurgencies across the east — than his defeat. Whatever the case, the U.S. will have to play a smarter game with its erstwhile fundamentalist “allies” than it did more than two decades ago in [Afghanistan](#).



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