

Libya's Democrats Have a Tough Battle to Fight

By [Omar Ashour](#)

September 17, 2012

The  **Moscow Times**

They are armed, and I am not going to fight a losing battle and kill my men over a demolished shrine," said Fawzi Abd al-Aali, the former Libyan interior minister, before he "resigned" in August. He was referring to the armed Salafi groups that were accused of destroying Sufi shrines. One of the accused groups was the Ansar al-Shariah Brigade, which was quick to support the demolition but denied any responsibility for it.

Ahmed Jibril, Libya's deputy ambassador to London, has now accused the brigade, headed by Muhammed Ali al-Zahawy, of perpetrating the attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, which killed the U.S. ambassador, Christopher Stevens, three other diplomatic personnel and several Libyan guards. Others have quickly embraced and promoted Jibril's allegation. But the picture is more complex.

The Ansar al-Shariah Brigade denied responsibility in a written statement and in a brief interview with its spokesperson, who at the time was in charge of guarding Al Jala Hospital

in Benghazi. Like its statement on the destruction of Sufi shrines, it denied involvement in the attack on the U.S. Consulate but stressed the gravity of the insult against Prophet Muhammad that putatively triggered it.

The Ansar al-Shariah Brigade attracted public attention in June as well, when about 300 armed members staged a rally in Benghazi, sparking outrage among Libyans. "We wanted to send a message to the General National Council members," according to Hashim al-Nawa, one of the brigade's commanders. "They should not come near the Shariah. It should be above the constitution and not an article for referendum."

But was the Ansar al-Shariah Brigade really behind the attack on the U.S. Consulate? The nature of Libya's post-revolution armed Islamist forces is by no means straightforward. Salafi jihadism is not an organization but an ideological trend based on the core belief that armed tactics of all kinds are the most effective — and, in some versions, the most legitimate — method of bringing about social and political change.

Last year, its adherents played an important role in the removal of Libya's brutal dictator, Moammar Gadhafi. Many subsequently matured politically, revised their worldview and shifted from armed to unarmed activism, forming political parties and contesting elections.

The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, for example, has produced two main political parties, which fared poorly in the election in July of a new General National Congress. Indeed, Libya's post-Gadhafi elections were in many ways a defeat for Libya's nonviolent Salafi parties and for the jihadists.

Other armed Islamist formations, including Salafi groups, accepted integration into Libya's new state institutions, such as the Interior and Defense Ministries. The National Guard, headed by the former deputy leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, Khaled al-Sharif, absorbed more than 30 brigades, mostly from the west and southwest regions of Libya.

But several armed formations, such as Ansar al-Shariah and the Imprisoned Sheikh Omar Abd al-Rahman Brigades, still reject the transition to party politics and integration into state institutions. These organizations are numerous but small. Some were not invited — or given sufficient incentive — to join official bodies.

"Nobody asked us to join the army or the police," Sufian bin Qumu, the commander of Ansar al-Shariah in Derna and a former Guantanamo detainee, said in an April interview. "They did not even give me or any of my men a reward for fighting."

Bin Qumu has a small paramilitary force training in the Bou Musafir forest on the outskirts of Derna. He insists that if the head of the boy scouts or the city's clan leaders asked him to disband the training camp, he would do so.

The tragic death of the U.S. ambassador and his colleagues has engendered wide public outrage in Libya, adding to the isolation and delegitimization of the armed groups. Dozens of Libyan activist groups have uploaded videos paying tribute to Stevens, as well as issuing statements against terrorism and al-Qaida. One of the Muslim Brothers' websites includes such a statement, and Libya's grand mufti also condemned the attack.

Two issues remain critical in Libya to prevent future tragedies. The first is the need to capitalize on public support and continue the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process that started under the National Transitional Council but was never completed. Second, the government must enhance its communication strategy.

Arab Spring governments condemned the outrageous movie smearing the prophet of Islam, but they should have stressed that U.S. governmental bodies had nothing to do with the film's production. Collective punishment and targeting the innocent is forbidden in the Koran in more than 20 verses, including the Star Chapter 53:18, which reads: "That no burdened person (with sins) shall bear the burden (sins) of another."

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