

# “Retracting” – Using Ideological Means for the Purposes of De-Radicalization

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## General

Recently, we have been witnessing a new phenomenon – key figures in the Islamic world, who in the past took part in armed Jihad or at least ideologically supported it, are now working to counter the radicalization process and to minimize recruitment to terrorist organizations. This phenomenon is known as “retraction”.

This phenomenon of “retraction” reflects a targeted effort, particularly on the part of authorities within the Muslim world, to harness the Islamic sources being used for radical indoctrination and to instead employ them as tools for fighting Islamic extremism.

In most cases, a repeating pattern may be observed: an Islamic leader, with an “aura” of a “Jihad fighter” and/or a certain degree of religious authority, whose devotion to Islam and willingness to sacrifice cannot be questioned, declares that the violent path taken by Islamic terrorist organizations is not the true path and no longer reflects, in his eyes, the principles of the Islamic faith. The more the authorities succeed in “convincing” senior Jihadi activists to retract their beliefs, the larger the circle of supporters abandoning the path of Jihad becomes.

The de-radicalization process is not new. Throughout the Muslim world, there are and have been rehabilitation programs, some of which are controversial as to their degree of success. For example, over the last two years, a de-radicalization process has taken place in Libya, led by Saif Al-Islam Gaddafi, resulting in the LIFG (Libyan Islamic Fighting Group) organization declaring its abandonment of the path of Jihad. At this point in time, however, it is still too early to estimate the success of the de-radicalization process in Libya or how this process will impact Al-Qaeda's conduct and activities in the Maghreb.

The phenomenon of "retraction" from the path of Jihad is small and limited in its scope. As such, it is difficult to distinguish the variables that influence senior members in Jihadi organizations to "retract" their radical beliefs and to understand the relationship between such factors. However, one can assume that certain variables do play a role in "retraction". These variables can be divided into two levels – those that are influential on a personal level and those that are influential on an organizational level:

1. Variables that influence on a personal level: oppression, imprisonment, feelings of persecution, personal rivalries, failure, no future, desire to receive the same preferential treatment from the authorities as other senior members who have already "retracted".
2. Variables that influence on an organizational level: oppression, lack of achievable goals, accumulating failures, loss of support – public opinion, divided leadership, financing problems.

It should be noted that it is in the authorities' interest to make "retraction" a more prominent phenomenon, especially in light of its current limited scope, so as to encourage its continuation and growth. For this reason, the media coverage of this phenomenon is particularly extensive and tends to be disproportionate to its actual scope.

The following document gives examples of the "retraction" phenomenon. It was written as a supplement to a previous document on the subject titled: "The De-Radicalization Process of Terrorist Organizations: The Libyan Case".<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>

[http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/0/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWVG\\_De\\_Radicalization\\_LIFG.pdf](http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/0/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWVG_De_Radicalization_LIFG.pdf)

### **The "Retractors" – The Algerian Case**

Recently, there have been several cases in Algeria of Al-Qaeda leaders "retracting" from the path of Jihad. The "Al-Faruq" Brigade Amir, "Abu Jandal", for example, turned himself in to security forces. Abu Jandal's retraction came less than two months after four other Jihadi leaders in Algeria retracted from their radical beliefs. These four leaders were: (1) Amir Tawaty Uthman, known as Abu Al-Abbas – formerly a member of the Senate Constituent Council of the "Salafi Group for Da'awa and Fighting" organization; (2) Gharis Ahsin Abd Al-Hamid, known as Abd Al-Qadir – Abdelmalek Droukdel's (AQIM leader) right-hand man before turning himself in and providing important information on his previous fellow Jihadists; (3) Muqaddam Lunis, known as Abu Al-Na'aman; (4) and Gharib Umar – former head of training for the "Al-Faruq" Brigade.

Respected religious figures who become retractors have great influence on members of terrorist organizations. The "Al-Shuruq" newspaper reported that Al-Qaeda members are trying to curb their violent activity since a number of sheikhs have issued Fatwas forbidding the killing of Algerians. The "Al-Shuruq" newspaper also reported that Abu Jandal turned himself in after hearing Sa'ayud Samir Musab and Tawaty Uthman speak on the Al-Quran radio of the initiative "to return to society's lap". Their message was directed at those still fighting in the mountains, calling on them to join the peace and national reconciliation initiative and not to let the opportunity to abandon their violent activity and repent pass.<sup>2</sup>

### **Call by Seven Former Amirs to Adopt the Reconciliation Initiative**

Apart from the recent wave of desertions, we are also witnessing a phenomenon in which veterans and founders of violent Salafi organizations, who have

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<sup>2</sup> "Al-Shuruq", September 1<sup>st</sup> 2010:  
<http://www.echoroukonline.com/ara/national/58778.html>

themselves ceased their armed involvement, are now collaborating with the authorities and calling on their former fellow operatives to lay down their arms. This "retraction" is the result of religious, ideological, and political reasons and/or the result of several of the variables discussed above.

In September of 2010, the Algerian media reported that seven former Amirs and founders of armed groups had declared a "Hudna" (Arabic term for "truce" or "armistice") and undertaken a reconciliation initiative. The seven Amirs were: (1) Hassan Hattab, the former Amir and founder of the "Salafi Group for Da'awa and Fighting"; (2) Al-Hashimi Sahnuni, one of the founders of the "Islamic Rescue Front"; (3) Abd Al-Fattah Zarawi Hamdash; (4) Rabi Al-Sharif Said, one of the founders of the "Salafi Group for Da'awa and Fighting"; (5) Sheikh Madi Abd Al-Rahman, one of the founders of the "Armed Islamic Group"; (6) Hattab Murad, one of the founders of the "Salafi Group for Da'awa and Fighting"; and (7) Bin Masad Abd Al-Qadir, the former Amir of the 9<sup>th</sup> province of the "Salafi Group for Da'awa and Fighting".

The former Amirs addressed religious clerics and public figures throughout the Muslim world in several open letters, in which they ask these figures to participate in "this peaceful and civilized religious initiative, which we have begun and which stems from the depth of our faith". According to them, this is "the only way to come out of the bloody crisis agitating our Muslim Algeria, which has stood fast in the face of Crusading imperialism for hundreds of years". The purpose of the initiative is "to bring the nation out of the dark cave it is in". In their letters, the seven former Amirs call on the central figures in the Muslim world to support the reconciliation initiative "and to award it a religious significance".

The proponents of this initiative have been directing their messages at the Amirs and commanders of terrorist organizations, as well as religious clerics and prominent public figures in the Islamic world (some of which are clearly Salafi), including Sheikh Salman bin Fahd Al-Ouda, Sheikh Safar Al-Hawali, Sheikh Abu Ishaq Al-Heweny and many others. In their open letters, they call on the leaders of the armed groups to declare a "Hudna" for several months.

In another letter, the seven former Amirs direct their message at the commanders and Amirs of two particular organizations: the "Salafi Group for Da'awa and Fighting" and the "Guardians of the Salafi Da'awa". In this letter, they address the issue of "the distortion of the divine Jihad commandment, through which Allah reinforced Islam and hoisted the flag of the religion". They write: "We are under the flag of Islam thanks to Allah, and we are under the shadow of faith". In the letter, the Amirs reassert their monotheistic belief and fear of God, and write: "We are in favor of any Jihad that is permitted according to religion, with clear characteristics, up to Judgment Day. We support any just struggle with our blood, lives, and money, until the countries of Islam are purged of imperialist conquerors and aggressors". The former Amirs write extensively on the importance of Jihad in the Islamic religion. However, they call on the members and leaders of Islamic terrorist organizations to obey the religious clerics, as they are the "masters of the Muslims" and they seek to rid Muslim society of its distortions and deviations. The clerics will cooperate with them [them being the terrorists that repent] and with anyone dedicated to rectifying the corruption in the society, as "the gates of rectification [of society] are many and are not reduced to weapons and struggle" [meaning that there are many ways to rectify society, not only through weapons and fighting].

The seven Amirs say that if you “silence the sound of weapons and give peace and reconciliation a chance in Algeria, the land of Islam, Allah shall repay you in good”. They then request that the armed men [terrorist organization members] stop their violent activity, declare a “Hudna”, return to their families and mosques, and continue the struggle through social and political Da'awa. The former Amirs claim that “those who carry weapons think only in the language of weapons” and therefore call on the armed men to lay down their weapons and to act reasonably, so as to “wake the nation and cause the enemies of Islam laying in wait for us, for our people, our religion and our country, to miss their opportunity”.<sup>3</sup>

### **Noman Benotman – Bin Laden’s Comrade in Arms Joins an Organization Fighting Fundamental Radicalism**

Noman Benotman, also known as Abu Muhammad Al-Libi, addressed Osama bin Laden in honor of the anniversary of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Benotman is a member of the Shura Council of the “Libyan Islamic Fighting Group” (LIFG). In the past, he fought alongside bin Laden. However, Benotman has since retracted from the path of Jihad and has recently joined the Quilliam Foundation, a British institution whose goals are to fight fundamental radicalism.<sup>4</sup> In his address to bin Laden, Benotman states: “I am writing you as a former comrade in arms. We fought together and faced death together. We fought under the flag of Islam to protect our Muslim brothers in Afghanistan and in response to their call for help. I am still proud today that I took part in the Jihad against the Soviet invasion and the

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<sup>3</sup> “Al-Shuruq”, September 8<sup>th</sup> 2010:

<http://www.echoroukonline.com/ara/national/59192.html>

<sup>4</sup> See the organization’s website: <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/noman-benotman.html>

Communist government in Kabul, and that I bore arms against it. We were right and no one could prevent our victory”.

Benotman continues: “After we completed our mission, we became a burden to the people for whom we crossed the border from Pakistan to Afghanistan. The Afghans, including Mullah Omar and his supporters, asked us to guard their country and their people. Instead, you [addressing bin Laden] wanted to use their land as a base for carrying out attacks against the United States, Israel, the West and western regimes. Did this prove useful in any way to the Afghan people?”.

Benotman goes on to say: “You did not spare any thought in disobeying Mullah Omar and in ignoring his orders. You ignored his orders to cease the provocation of the United States due to its disastrous consequences for Afghanistan. How can one settle the contradiction between your claim that you are carrying out Jihad for what you call ‘the Islamic State’ and your disobeying the ruler of that same state, to whom Al-Qaeda swore allegiance?”. To support his claim, Benotman mentions Abu Hafs Al-Mauritani, Al-Qaeda's religious cleric, and says: “Do you [bin Laden] not remember the opinion of the late Sheikh Abu Hafs Al-Mauritani, who supported the duty to obey Mullah Omar and to cease military activity outside of Afghanistan, and who claimed that what was necessary at the time was not Jihad on a global level but the rebuilding of Afghanistan, which is the duty of every Muslim living in this country?”. Benotman continues: “Furthermore, I remind you of Abu Muhammad Al-Ziyat, head of Al-Qaeda’s Security Committee [who was appointed as head of its Military Committee in 2000] who agreed with Abu Hafs Al-Mauritani. He believed that the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks were not permitted religiously, as they did not receive Mullah Omar’s authorization. The question raised by many people, even people from amongst Al-Qaeda's ranks, is:



What right did Al-Qaeda have to ignore Mullah Omar's instructions? It should be noted, however, that even if Mullah Omar had sanctioned the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, these attacks are still not acceptable from an Islamic standpoint".

In his address, Benotman reminds bin Laden of how they met with Ayman Al-Zawahiri, and how he himself spoke in the name of the LIFG on the failure of the Jihad movement and the need for the violence to end and Al-Qaeda to cease its war outside of Afghanistan. Benotman says that, at the time, bin Laden asked him to use the LIFG's global logistics infrastructure to reinforce the Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders. Benotman claims that he refused, without waiting for an answer from the other LIFG members, and that bin Laden then promised to carry out one last great attack.

On the subject of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, Benotman says: "What was the purpose behind this attack and why was it carried out? What did it result in other than mass killings, occupation, destruction, hatred towards Muslims, the humiliation of Islam and a heavy hand used against Muslims on the part of the governments ruling Arab countries?". He goes on to say: "I doubted at the time the integrity and logic of your [bin Laden's] plan, and I warned you in the summer of 2000 of the destructive ramifications that would result from escalating the battle against the United States. At the time, you believed I was wrong, but history has proven that I was correct. Your terrorist attacks have caused damage to millions of innocent Muslims and non-Muslims. Is this the objective of Jihad?".

Benotman claims, in his address, that Muslims all over the world are rejecting Al-Qaeda's notion of Jihad and its idea of the establishment of an Islamic State. He gives the example of the Palestinians, who he says consider Al-Qaeda's

intervention in their affairs to be negative, adding that "where there is security, Al-Qaeda brings fear and chaos".

Benotman goes on to discuss the negative consequences that the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and Al-Qaeda's activities in general have had on Muslims living in western countries and in China. He then addresses the situation of Muslims in their own countries: "the Iraqi people have begun living in an environment ruled by fear of 'Takfir' and of daily suicide attacks. In Pakistan, Yemen, Algeria, Somalia and other countries, fear rules entire peoples simply because some young people continue to fight and intimidate in the name of Islam and shed blood while claiming Jihad, to gain a martyr's death. Is this not the path to hell?".

Benotman then makes a suggestion to bin Laden: "I advise you to have Al-Qaeda declare a unilateral cessation of its military activity for a period of six months". According to Benotman, this cease-fire has three objectives: (1) to allow for a re-examination of the organization's ideology by answering questions such as – what is the effect of the military activities on Islam and the Muslims? Do these activities enable the attainment of peace, liberty and Da'awa? What will Islam lose if Al-Qaeda ceases its violence? (2) to allow for the examination of the public opinion that Muslims around the world have towards Al-Qaeda; and (3) to allow Al-Qaeda members and followers the opportunity to follow the path of religious clerics such as Salman Al-Ouda who rejected Al-Qaeda's perception of Jihad and tactics.<sup>5</sup>

As noted above, Benotman has recently joined the ranks of the Quilliam foundation. The organization is a "think tank" and, according to its website, its goals are to promote religious freedom, human rights and democracy and to develop an Islamic identity. The organization was founded by Maajid Nawaz, who

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<sup>5</sup> "Al-Sharq Al-Awsat", September 10<sup>th</sup> 2010:  
<http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11609&article=586097>

is himself a "retractor". Nawaz was a member of the "Hizb ut-Tahrir" and was even imprisoned for four years in Egypt as a result of his radical actions and violent activity. In prison, he began changing his beliefs and abandoned the Islamist ideology.<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that, according to the organization's website, the Quilliam foundation receives grants from the "public sector", amongst other places. In other words, the British government helps finance it.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Battle against De-Radicalization – The Yemen Case**

In Yemen, there have been attempts in the past to re-educate religious extremists. In 2002, a program was launched with the goal of starting a dialogue with extreme Islamist groups in the country. This program continued until 2005 and was headed by Judge Hamoud Al-Hitar. Its objective was to correct the view of extremists, and to show that the Yemen government does not operate in contravention to the Quran and the Sunna.<sup>8</sup>

Al-Hitar serves today as the Yemen Minister of Religious Endowments (Awqaf). In January 2010, he declared that Yemen, "as part of the steps it is taking against terrorism, is operating through an ideological dialogue with those who were seduced [by radical ideas] but were not involved in bloodshed, with the aim of correcting the erroneous and untrue ideas set in their minds". He added that the program was successful in many cases, and that former radicals have since returned to the true path, which has aided their re-integration in society.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The organization's website: <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/maaheed-nawaz.html>

<sup>7</sup> The organization's website: <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/faqs.html>

<sup>8</sup> Workshop on Terrorist Rehabilitation (WTRI) – Report of a Workshop Organized By The International Centre For Political Violence And Terrorism Research (Singapore). 25-30 November 2009. National Library, Singapore. S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, 2010, P. 11.

<sup>9</sup> The Yemen news agency. January 19<sup>th</sup> 2010:  
<http://www.sabanews.net/ar/news203598.htm>

In actuality, however, the de-radicalization program in Yemen has failed, and today the country is in the midst of a battle with Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), led by Nasir Abd Al-Karim Al-Wahishi.

### **De-Radicalization – The Libyan Case**

In Libya, the authorities continue to hold a dialogue with prisoners belonging to armed organizations, and especially with LIFG members. This is a continuation of the Libyan de-radicalization effort which began in 2007. Six members of LIFG even wrote a book on the subject of retraction, titled "Revisionist Research Regarding the Jihad Conventions: The Reward and the Control over People", which was published in December of 2009, in collaboration with Sheikh Salman Al-Ouda and Sheikh Al-Qaradawi. It should be noted that the six authors are senior members of the LIFG, and include Sami Mustafa Al-Sa'adi (known as Abu Al-Mundhir Al-Sa'adi), the LIFG's religious leader; Abd Al-Hakim Al-Khuwailidi Belhaj, the organization's Amir; Mustafa Al-Sayid Qnaifaid, the organization's military commander; and Khalid Muhammad Al-Sharif, the deputy Amir.

In March 2010, the Libyan authorities released Sa'adi, Belhaj and Al-Sharif from prison, after the three men abandoned their radical ideas. The other three authors' release is pending, and, in the meantime, they are giving classes and lectures in the prisons, and have been key forces in the dialogue between the Yemen government and hundreds of imprisoned young radicals. Furthermore, following the retraction of these senior members and their efforts to spread the phenomenon among other imprisoned activists, 700 LIFG members have been released.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> "Al-Hayat", September 2<sup>nd</sup> 2010: <http://ksa.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/178137>

### De-Radicalization – The Mauritanian Case

In Mauritania, the Conference for National Dialogue was held in October 2010. The conference was sponsored by the country's president, and its aim was to abolish the phenomenon of terrorism and radicalism. Discussions at the conference focused on four levels: the religious level, the security level, the cultural-educational level and the political level. During the religious discussion, several experts participated. They emphasized the peaceful nature of Islam and showed how the Mauritanian constitution is based on the Islamic religion. The political commentator, Fadl Walad Muhammad, noted that "the religious aspect is the point of contention between the radicals and the government", a fact that is made clear in the "Ansar Allah Al-Murabitun Fi Bilad Al-Shanqit" organization's description of the Mauritanian government as "heretic" and the organization's calls for the government to be destroyed and those in it to be killed.<sup>11</sup> Abdullah Walad Bayyah, a religious cleric, also spoke at the conference. He said that young people following this path [joining terrorist organizations] are committing a sin, as the conditions for Jihad are not present.

The government has since released a number of prisoners affiliated with Al-Qaeda, in response to the demands made during the dialogue with the radical Salafi-Jihad entities. It has also been reported that, recently, 28 members of "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb" (AQIM) have escaped the organization's stronghold and turned themselves in to the Mauritanian Army. This event occurred several days after six other operatives turned themselves in to the Mauritanian authorities.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Al-Sharq Al-Awsat", October 25<sup>th</sup> 2010:

<http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11654&article=592440&feature>

<sup>12</sup> The "Al-Jazeera" network, November 22<sup>nd</sup> 2010:

<http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/1B5395F8-7808-483D-8E6B-67F5D7B0C524.htm>

Recently, the Mauritania media published the testimony of a young Mauritanian who retracted from the ranks of a terrorist organization. In his testimony, the young man declares that he has given up the radical backward ideas that contradict Islam and the national interest. He says that his decision was the result of the dialogue going on in the country, the release of prisoners, and the President's promise to grant amnesty to those who choose to return to the true path. The former terrorist explained that he had joined an organization preaching what it called Jihad after being persuaded that this path serves the Islamic religion. However, once he fully entered the organization, he realized that the information he had been indoctrinated with was untrue; moreover, his fear that the weapons of these organizations were directed towards Islam and Muslims was proven correct. For these reasons, he decided to voluntarily turn himself in to the police.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "Al-Sirag", November 17<sup>th</sup> 2010: <http://www.essirage.net/index.php/news-and-reports/790-2010-11-17-11-13-32>