



PLAYING IMAM: Libya's former leader Muammar Gaddafi leads mass prayers in Agadez, 2007. REUTERS/SAMUEL DE JAEGERE

The new Libya struggles with a twisted legacy: a Muslim humanitarian network that ran covert operations

Gaddafi's secret missionaries

BY TOM HENEGHAN, RELIGION EDITOR

TRIPOLI, MARCH 28, 2012

On a tidy campus in his capital of Tripoli, dictator Muammar Gaddafi sponsored one of the world's leading Muslim missionary networks. It was the smiling face of his Libyan regime, and the world smiled back.

The World Islamic Call Society (WICS) sent staffers out to build mosques and provide humanitarian relief. It gave poor students a free university education, in religion, finance and computer science. Its missionaries traversed Africa preaching a moderate, Sufi-tinged version of Islam as an alternative to the strict

Wahhabism that Saudi Arabia was spreading.

The Society won approval in high places. The Vatican counted it among its partners in Christian-Muslim dialogue and both Pope John Paul and Pope Benedict received its secretary general. Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, spiritual head of the world's Anglicans, visited the campus in 2009 to deliver a lecture. The following year, the U.S. State Department noted approvingly how the Society had helped Filipino Christian migrant workers start a church in Libya.

But the Society had a darker side that occasionally flashed into view. In Africa, rumours abounded for years of Society staffers paying off local politicians or supporting insurgent groups. In 2004, an American Muslim leader was convicted of a plot to assassinate the Saudi crown prince, financed in part by the Society. In 2011, Canada stripped the local Society office of its charity status after it found the director had diverted Society money to a radical group that had attempted a coup in Trinidad and Tobago in 1990 and was linked to a plot to bomb New York's Kennedy Airport in 2007.

Now, with the Gaddafi regime gone, it is possible to piece together a fuller picture of this two-faced group. Interviews with three dozen current and former Society staff and Libyan officials, religious leaders and exiles, as well as analysis of its relations with the West, show how this arm of the Gaddafi regime was able to sustain a decades-long double game.

Yet Libya's new leaders, the same ones who fought bitterly to overthrow Gaddafi and dismantle his 42-year dictatorship, are unanimous in wanting to preserve the WICS. They say they can disentangle its religious work from the dirty tricks it played and retain the Society as a legitimate religious charity – and an instrument of soft power for oil-rich Libya.

Global reach

The World Islamic Society operates in 36 countries:



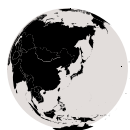
AFRICA

Benin, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Libya, Madagascar, Mali, Nigeria, Sudan, Tunisia



AMERICAS

Brazil, Canada, Guyana, U.S.



ASIA-PACIFIC

Australia, India, Japan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Maldives, Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea, Syria, Yemen



EUROPE

Austria, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Serbia, Switzerland, Turkey, U.K.

Source: WICS

A committee led by a leading anti-Gaddafi Islamic scholar, Sheikh Al Dokali Mohammed Al Alem, is now investigating the Society's activities. Their report may take months to appear, but a Reuters investigation has found Libyan officials in Tripoli now say openly what under Gaddafi was taboo – that the religious Society was allied to a huge shadow network, especially in Africa.

“There are still some loose ends in the Islamic Call Society in Africa,” said Noman Benotman, a former member of an al-Qaida-linked Libyan Islamist group who now works on deradicalisation of jihadists at the Quilliam Foundation in London.

“They still have a lot of money going around through these channels that used to belong to the Islamic Call Society,” he said.

“Huge amounts of money are involved. I think we're talking about one to two billion dollars.”

BACK CHANNEL

In a new book, Gaddafi's former foreign minister alleges that the dictator used the Society as a back channel to secretly agitate against Christian heads of state in Africa and support Muslim groups seeking power. He accuses the Society's former secretary general, Mohammad Ahmed Al Sharif, of personally delivering cash to African leaders to finance election campaigns.

“From the start, Gaddafi wanted the WICS to be one of the foreign arms affiliated to him personally,” Abdel Rahman Shalgam writes in the Arabic-language book, “Men Around Gaddafi.” “Among the locals, the World Islamic Call Society was known as the World Security Call Society,” says Shalgam, now Libya's ambassador at the United Nations in New York.

The facade of semi-independence from the regime collapsed completely when Libya's revolution broke out early last year. Sharif turned to Russia and Sri Lanka in failed bids to get them to mediate with the rebels.

Shalgam accuses Sharif of using WICS money to rush African mercenaries to Libya to fight for Gaddafi. Defence Minister Osama Al Juweli has alleged that the television studio on the Society campus was used to edit video to make it appear that NATO bombing had hit civilian areas of Tripoli.

Sharif told Reuters he can refute the charges against him, but will not speak publicly until an official inquiry is finished.

The intriguing question is how the Society escaped Western scrutiny for so long. One likely reason is that it seemed like small fish by Libyan standards. Gaddafi was himself bizarre – President Ronald Reagan called him “the mad dog of the Middle East.” And his role in backing Palestinian

fighters, African insurgents, the Irish Republican Army and the Lockerbie bombers was provocative enough to overshadow an NGO of preachers.

Its active interest in interfaith dialogue also helped burnish its image. More than that, the moderate version of Islam that WICS preachers spread looked increasingly attractive after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the United States carried out by mostly Saudi hijackers.

Saudi Arabia has exported its strict Wahhabi Islam through its own missionary society, the Muslim World League, since 1962. Gaddafi's bitter rivalry with Riyadh extended to Islam as well, and the Society competed with the League to build free mosques and schools around the world. This became a strategic asset when Gaddafi patched up relations with the West in 2003 by taking responsibility for the 1998 Lockerbie bombings and abandoning his pursuit of weapons of mass destruction.

Rev Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary of the Geneva-based World Council of Churches, delivered a lecture at the Society in January 2011. He says dealing with Gaddafi's Libya required a delicate balance. "Our faith calls us to speak with everyone," he said, stressing the WCC did not know any specific allegations against the Society when he visited. "We understand the risk involved and the complexity of situations such as this."

Today, the transitional Libyan government is grappling with what to do about the Society. Its former leader, Sharif, has been sacked and a long official investigation is underway. But most of its staff is still in place. Rather than scrap the Society as a Gaddafi-tainted institution, the government is pursuing a modest purge.

"The Society was misused by the Gaddafi regime. It was part of his intelligence (network)," said Deputy Prime Minister Mustafa Abushagur. "Clearly, the Society itself has a good mission if it is done right."

During the Libyan dictatorship, few

people knew the Society's real size and influence. It answered only to Gaddafi, and its financial transactions were exempt from all taxes and duties. Massoud Al Wazni, a member of the committee now overseeing it, said the annual budget was about \$45 million and the central staff numbered about 900, with about 2,000 Arabic teachers and as many Muslim preachers around the world. Wazni gave no other details of the budget figure.

That figure could not account for the large amounts of cash that Shalgam alleges Sharif regularly had delivered to African leaders. Asked about these payments, one Society official said he himself was once ordered to deliver briefcases with \$25,000 each to two cabinet ministers while on routine Society work in an African country. When he refused, he was called back to Tripoli and jailed for a short time.

LIBYA TOO SMALL FOR GADDAFI

When he seized power in 1969 as a 27-year-old army captain, Gaddafi dreamed of succeeding Egypt's Gamal Abdul Nasser as the new champion of Arab nationalism and Third World revolution.

The Palestinian cause was central to his plans. He created a "Jihad Fund" to help finance Palestinian guerrillas and had the Palestinian militants who had been killed at the 1972 Munich Olympics buried as heroes in Tripoli. Gaddafi also created an "Islamic Legion" that fought in the Sahel, Uganda and Lebanon. He supported liberation movements across Africa and shipped huge supplies of arms and money to the Irish Republican Army.

Launched in 1972, the Society was presented as the human face of his revolution, building mosques, schools and clinics for needy Muslims around the globe. After the Arabs' defeat by Israel in the 1967 war, calls for some kind of Islamic government were growing in the Middle East. Creating the Society was a nod in that direction and proved popular with Libya's religious



SPEAKER: Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, pictured here giving a book to Pope Benedict XVI, delivered a lecture at the Society on behalf of the World Council of Churches in January 2011 **REUTERS/OSSERVATORE ROMANO**

leadership.

The Society was described as independent of the government, but financed from the same Jihad Fund as the Palestinians: a tax of three percent on all individuals and four percent on all companies working in Libya.

Benotman, who has studied the Society in detail, said an NGO like that was a classic fig leaf for undercover work. "At the hard core of the structure of the Call Society, there were officers from the intelligence service," he said. "You can't give this work to the preachers. You have to trust your intelligence members within the Call Society to carry on this work as field officers."

The WICS's focus was Africa, especially the large Muslim communities in West Africa and the Sahel region that Gaddafi considered Libya's back yard. But it also built mosques and Islamic centres in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Malta and the Netherlands. It contributed along with other Arab states to the construction

of the huge mosque in Rome and the Central Mosque in London. It was also active in the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia.

"Libya was too small for him," said former ambassador Saad El Shlmani, now Foreign Ministry spokesman. "He wanted to be the leader of all the Africans, of all the Muslims, of the whole world."

SHOWDOWN WITH THE WEST

Insiders say the Society's back-channel operations developed during the 1980s. "You have to link this with the international political atmosphere," said Nagi El Hadi El Haraam, a WICS auditor now helping investigate the group's inner workings.

By the 1980s, Gaddafi's firebrand foreign policy had made him enemies across the West and the Middle East. The United States had listed Libya as a state supporter of terrorism in 1979, closed its embassy the next year and imposed ever tighter embargoes on American trade with Libya. Britain broke off diplomatic relations in 1984 after a London policewoman was killed by gunfire from the Libyan embassy during a protest there.

The United States finally lost patience and bombed Libya in 1986, hitting suspected terrorist training centres in Tripoli and Benghazi, including Gaddafi's compound in the capital. When Pan Am Flight 103 exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988, killing 270, Gaddafi was suspected of ordering the attack to avenge the U.S. bombing.

Shortly after Lockerbie, Gaddafi created the World Islamic Popular Leadership (WIPL) as a separate department within the Society, answerable to General Secretary Sharif. The WIPL was to mobilise Islamic leaders around the world to support Muslim militants in Chechnya, Kosovo and Somalia, defend Muslim women wearing headscarves in Europe and encourage black Muslims in the United States. Among the allies Gaddafi won was black nationalist Muslim preacher Louis Farrakhan.



ALLY: Muslim preacher Louis Farrakhan, pictured here in 1997, said in March 2011 Libya had lent the Nation of Islam \$8 million over the years and defended 'Brother Gaddafi'. A memo that month suggested the WIPL helped **REUTERS/FALEH KHEIBER**

The WIPL was "a foreign body embedded into the Call Society," said Haraam, the Society auditor.

With its international network, the Society offered a handy cover to evade bans on financial transactions. As an independent NGO, it was not subject to the U.N. embargo or unilateral bans imposed by the United States. A 1990 American diplomatic cable from Khartoum, revealed by WikiLeaks, describes the WICS as a Libyan "front group" active in propaganda but has no other details about it.

The WIPL office at WICS headquarters began to buzz with activity three years later, around the time the United Nations imposed a tight embargo on Libya for not handing over the suspected Lockerbie bombers. Gaddafi "started funnelling cash into this office so he would support African countries and ... have some sort of room to move," auditor Haraam said. "He would not be totally cornered."

It was also in 1989 that the Society revived a dialogue with the Vatican begun in 1976 but lapsed since then. The Catholics

weren't sure why Tripoli wanted to restart talks, but agreed to two colloquia in 1990 and two more meetings in 1993 and 1997. According to a religious source in Tripoli, Gaddafi used the Society's links to the Vatican in a last-ditch effort to avoid the U.N. sanctions.

Just before the U.N. embargo, then-foreign minister Shalgam visited the Vatican looking for help. The Catholic bishop in Tripoli, Giovanni Martinelli, appealed to Western states not to humiliate Gaddafi but seek dialogue with him. After this effort failed, Gaddafi continued to woo the Vatican with promises of better conditions for the tiny Catholic community in Libya.

In a propaganda coup for Gaddafi, Vatican Foreign Minister Jean-Louis Tauran visited Libya in 1994. He made the last leg of the journey from southern Tunisia to Tripoli by car because of the embargo on air traffic. Washington watched with concern as the Church's relations with Tripoli improved, and tried to persuade it not to establish diplomatic relations, but Pope John Paul went ahead and recognised Libya in 1997.

Asked why it marched out of step with Western countries, a Vatican spokesman said the Holy See maintained diplomatic relations with states, not governments. "Such relations have the primary aim of favouring the good of the local Church," he said. The Vatican also felt that ties with Tripoli opened an avenue for a dialogue.

FOCUS ON AFRICA

In the 1990s, the Society expanded its work in Africa, stepping up its "Islamic convoys" of medicines, clothes and food as far down as southern Africa. It held conferences on education, culture and the links between African and Arab societies on the continent. It also funded Islamic radio stations in Togo, Benin, Chad, Cameroon, Mali and South Africa.

African leaders spoke out increasingly loudly against the U.N. embargo. South

African President Nelson Mandela visited Tripoli in 1997 to thank Gaddafi for supporting the African National Congress during the apartheid years and to condemn the embargo. He also had to make the final leg of the trip by car.

The highlight of Gaddafi's charm offensive came with a series of so-called "defiance tours" in convoys through West Africa. On the first of these road shows in 1997, the man who billed himself as "the Revolutionary Muslim" led huge prayer sessions in Niamey, the capital of Niger, and in Kano in northern Nigeria. On his third swing through the region in 2000, he took in Niger, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Togo, "crossing more than 4,000 km through cities, villages, deserts, jungles, plains and modern towns," as one Society report put it.

WICS staff were drafted in to help organise and support the visits. "When he went to an African country, of course he would use our infrastructure there – if you opposed his will, you knew what would happen," said Haraam, referring to the local Society offices and the contacts the staff had. Among their tasks was helping Soci-

“When Gaddafi went to an African country, of course he would use our infrastructure there – if you opposed his will, you knew what would happen.

Nagi El Hadi El Haraam

WICS auditor

ety preachers in the country to mobilise the crowds, and contacting local officials to arrange meetings between Gaddafi and the influential tribal and religious leaders in the region.

THE MASK SLIPS

The United Nations partially suspended its sanctions, allowing air travel and industrial equipment sales to resume, after Libya handed over the two Libyan suspects in the Lockerbie bombing to a court at The Hague in 1999.

The sanctions were fully lifted in September 2003 when Tripoli agreed to pay \$2.7 billion in compensation to the 270 families of the Lockerbie victims. Its announcement in December that it was giv-

ing up its programme of weapons of mass destruction signalled Libya's willingness to end its pariah period and build better relations with the West.

It was around this time that the Society's mask slipped to reveal what became the best-documented case of its intelligence work.

Abdurahman Muhammad Alamoudi, a Yemeni-born U.S. Muslim leader who sometimes advised the State Department on interfaith relations, was arrested in Washington in September 2003 on return from a long trip to Britain, Syria, Egypt and Libya.

As his grand jury indictment a month later alleged, Alamoudi had met a Libyan at a London hotel in August who gave him "\$340,000 in cash from the Islamic Call Society, a branch of the Government of Libya." That sum was part of at least \$910,000 he had received over eight years from Libya, depositing it in foreign banks and withdrawing small sums to avoid alerting U.S. authorities.

In plea negotiations, Alamoudi revealed he had used some of the money to pay two Saudi dissidents to assassinate the then Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, Gaddafi's rival, who is now the Saudi king. He pleaded guilty in 2004 and was sentenced to 23 years in prison, although his expected release date is now 2018.

Even after the embargos were lifted, Gaddafi continued showering attention on Africa, partly for propaganda at home. "The WICS people on the ground would organise marches and receptions and take his picture everywhere," said Shlmani, the former diplomat in Africa. "Back here in Libya, we'd see him on TV presented as a popular man. He was unpopular here and he wanted to show he was popular abroad."

How much these visits cost is not clear. A U.S. diplomatic cable from Mali, revealed by WikiLeaks, quoted an embassy source close to Gaddafi as saying Libya had paid up to \$10 million for festivities during the



AFRICAN BROTHER: Gaddafi was presented on Libyan TV as a popular man in Africa. Here he examines the African Union flag at a summit in 2009. REUTERS/CARLOS GARCIA RAWLINS

dictator's visit to Timbuktu in April 2006.

The WICS mask slipped again in 2010 when the Canada Revenue Agency audited the Society's office in London, Ontario, and concluded it got all its funds from Libya and distributed them mostly to Muslim recipients outside Canada. In 1998, it said, the office transferred \$216,735.41 to recipients in the United States and Trinidad. The next year, it sent \$350,135.60 to the United States, Egypt and Trinidad. The agency found that the Alamoudi plea deal proved the Society and its network were "used as a front to disguise the true origin and destination of funds in an effort to circumvent sanctions against Libya." Canada revoked the office's charitable status in March 2011.

The transfers to Trinidad, which added up to over \$180,000, pointed to another piece in the Society's double game. They were made to Jamaat al-Muslimeen ("Muslim Community"), whose leader had tried to overthrow the Trinidad and Tobago government in 1990 with Libyan money and arms.

UNDER THE WESTERN RADAR

If Western religious and political officials suspected anything untoward about the Society, its religious work and its leader's personal diplomacy apparently dampened their doubts. Vatican officials met their Society counterparts in Rome in 2004, and Pope Benedict received a Society delegation at the Vatican in 2008.

A Catholic priest who took part in several dialogue sessions with the Society said the Vatican had heard rumours about its activities in Africa, but was more concerned that it was trying to bribe Africans into converting to Islam than about purported political high jinks. "There were suspicions (of bribery for conversions) but we didn't find any proof," he said.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams delivered a lecture on divine revelation to the Islamic Call College during a visit to Tripoli in 2009. His website de-

From "Islamic convoys" to education

If outsiders didn't notice the dark side of WICS, it's probably because the Society has done so much legitimate work as a religious and humanitarian NGO. It has built scores of mosques and Islamic centres for Muslim communities around the world and set up hospitals and clinics, especially in many African countries.

The Society's offices in 36 countries employ about 2,000 teachers – many of them Arabic language instructors – and as many preachers, or "doats," to spread the Muslim faith.

Since the early 1980s, WICS has sent "Islamic convoys" to needy African countries with trucks full of medicines, food, clothing and other relief aid. During Ramadan, it sends Libyan preachers and Koran reciters to Muslim communities and distributes food for celebrations of iftar, the evening break in the day-long fast. It has also provided free Haj trips to Mecca for hundreds of Muslims from 60 different countries.

The Islamic Call College (ICC) at the Tripoli campus has graduated about 7,000 students from 92 countries since opening in 1974. The 80 faculty members focus mainly on Islamic studies, but students can also major in secular studies such as finance or computer science.

The education is completely free, a key attraction for many students from Africa

and Asia. "I could not have had a university education without this scholarship," said Salman Balamaze, an Arabic language major from Uganda, on the campus.

The ICC has opened branch colleges in Damascus, Ndjamena and Dakar as well as a department of Arabic Language and Islamic Culture at Benin's National University. It has also financed the Muslim College in London.

The WICS claims to have won over 300,000 converts to Islam, 5,545 inspired by Gaddafi himself. It espouses Libya's traditional, Sufi-inspired Islam. This has put it in competition with Saudi Arabia's Muslim World League, which has been spreading the kingdom's strict Wahhabi doctrines since 1962.

The WICS also actively preached interfaith understanding. It launched a dialogue with the Vatican as far back as 1976 and later expanded to meet with Anglicans, mainline and evangelical Protestants.

Pope Benedict met a WICS delegation in Rome in 2008 and Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, spiritual leader of the world's Anglicans, gave a lecture at the Tripoli campus the following year. Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, secretary general of the World Council of Churches (WCC), spoke at WICS in January 2011.

By Tom Heneghan

BRANCH COLLEGES: The Society employs around 2,000 teachers. Pictured here, the Muslim College in London, which it has financed **REUTERS/ TOBY MELVILLE**





ISLAMIC STUDIES: The Islamic Call College in Tripoli, pictured here in February, has graduated about 7,000 students from 92 countries since opening in 1974. **REUTERS/ISMAIL ZETOUNY**

scribes the Society as “the world’s foremost Islamic benevolent organisation with members from every corner of the globe.” Aides to the Anglican leader said they had no indications then or since that WICS was anything but a religious NGO interested in interfaith dialogue.

A WikiLeaks-revealed cable from the U.S. embassy in Tripoli in 2009 said the Society spread moderate interpretations of Islam in Africa and Asia, countering “the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism (invariably described as ‘Wahhabism’).”

The U.S. State Department’s 2010 International Religious Freedom Report noted approvingly the emphasis on religious moderation and interfaith cooperation in the Society, which it described as “the official conduit for the state-approved form of Islam” and “the religious arm of the government’s foreign policy.”

Among those who broke bread with the Society was World Council of Churches Secretary General Tveit, who lectured on the shared values of Christians and Muslims in Tripoli just one month before the

uprising against Gaddafi broke out in February 2011. He said his organisation would not have dealt with the WICS if it had known its dark side.

“In this particular situation, the WCC decided to work with the WICS because of its commitment to inter-religious dialogue and willingness to work with the WCC and its partners,” he said.

The firebrand U.S. black Muslim preacher Louis Farrakhan never hid his ties with Libya, but the uprising prompted even more disclosure than before. On March 31, 2011, Farrakhan defended “Brother Gaddafi” at a rare news conference and said



Sheikh Al Dokali Mohammed Al Alem

Libya had lent the Nation of Islam \$8 million over the years.

At his news conference, Farrakhan, a deputy chairman of the WIPL, said Gaddafi had also helped him take three tours to visit Muslim leaders in over 40 countries. “I’ve been all over the world because of that man,” he said.

The WIPL apparently lent a helping hand for Farrakhan’s pro-Gaddafi media blitz. Officials reviewing Society files showed Reuters a recently found confidential memo dated March 15, 2011, indicating the WIPL would pay for U.S. newspaper ads that Farrakhan placed to defend him. The Nation of Islam did not respond to requests for comment.

Sharif dropped all pretence of independence once the uprising started. He met Bishop Martinelli in mid-March, urging him to help provide “accurate information” about the situation in Libya. In the months that followed, the Tripoli-based bishop gained notoriety in the West for sharply condemning the NATO bombings. Martinelli declined a request for an interview.

The WICS head had less success in May when he tried to convince Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to help mediate between Tripoli and the Benghazi-based rebels. Lavrov told him Libya must obey the U.N. resolution urging it not to attack civilians. Soon after that, the Society office in Colombo asked for help from Sri Lankan Justice Minister Rauff Hakeem, who represented the island’s Muslims during discussions between the government and Tamil rebels to end the civil war. He also turned them down.

WHAT TO DO WITH WICS

Libya’s new leadership says the challenge now is to purge the Society of its dark side. Officials interviewed in Tripoli blamed the secretive WIPL for the undercover work. Sheikh Dokali, head of the five-man committee now running the Society, singled out WIPL as the main focus of the purge.

REUTERS/ISMAIL ZETOUNY

ISLAMIST INTRIGUE GADDAFI'S SECRET MISSIONARIES



SECRET BUDGET: Expenses for Gaddafi's WICS trips to Africa were paid from a secret WIPL budget. Here, he is welcomed by Ivory Coast's former president Laurent Gbagbo on a June, 2007 visit. **REUTERS/ THIERRY GOUEGNON**

"Only a very limited number of persons were aware of the activities of the WIPL. It was a total misuse of our office without our knowledge," he said. "The WIPL is closed now and has been crossed out of our organisational structure completely."

As committee members present it, only Society head Sharif and two WIPL officials – administrator Mahmoud Hussain Reeh and the recently deceased accountant Ahmed Maidan – had an overview of the WIPL's covert activities. Reeh is believed to be hiding in Tunisia and Sharif is being questioned in Tripoli.

Sheikh Saad Falah, head of the missionary department at the Society, said expenses for Gaddafi's Africa trips organised by the WICS were paid from the secret WIPL budget. "We don't have any details about how much he spent and where," Falah said.

The fact that many senior WICS officials are still with the Society raises questions about how thorough the purge has been. Benotman doubts the Society could be neatly divided into a good WICS and a bad WIPL; he says his understanding is that intelligence agents were working on

both sides. More information about who did what might be found in files at the Society's headquarters. But they are now under control of Defence Minister Juweli, who seized the headquarters in January to use as his new ministry's offices, and has been holding them pending a resolution of his dispute with the government over possession of the property.

The Society appears to have the money needed to carry on. Falah, the head of the missionary department, says it hasn't received any financing in two years from the government, since its share of the Jihad Tax was "taken over by one of Gaddafi's sons."

It does have revenues from some far-sighted investments made decades ago. Two real estate ventures – a five-tower complex on the Tripoli seafloor, and an office building in Benghazi – are preferred addresses for oil companies, airlines and other foreign firms.

The investigation into the WICS will probably take many months before final decisions are taken. The new WICS may look much like the official part of the old Society, possibly with a new name, and

serve as one of the new Libya's open window on the outside world.

El Hadi El Ghariani, an adviser to the interim prime minister, suggested the Society could take on promoting dialogue among Islam's competing sects. Aref Ali Nayed, a Sufi theologian who is now Tripoli's ambassador in the United Arab Emirates, said it should be turned into a university modelled on Al Azhar, the revered seat of Sunni learning in Cairo. He sees it countering the Saudi brand of Islam – the role it was supposed to play under Gaddafi.

"It could be a kind of anti-radicalisation think tank," he said.

Additional reporting by Hisham El Dani in Tripoli; Editing by Mike Williams and Sara Ledwith

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