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How Gaddafi's Ouster Unleashed Terror

By Jonathan Marshall

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Exclusive: Hillary Clinton still sees the 2011 Libyan “regime change” as a feather in her cap as Secretary of State, but the violent ouster of Muammar Gaddafi turned Libya into a badlands for Islamic terrorists who have spread their killing sprees far and wide, just as Gaddafi warned, says Jonathan Marshall.

The bloody terrorist attacks in Paris had their genesis not only in the poor Muslim suburbs of France and Belgium, and on the battlefields of Syria, but also in NATO's operation to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The Libyan strongman gave the West fair warning at the time that his ouster would give an enormous boost to radical jihadists. Because no one in power listened, thousands have died in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Mali and now France.

Among the many extremist groups running wild in Libya today is the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh). Headquartered in the city of Sirte — the late Col. Gaddafi's hometown on the central Mediterranean coast — the ISIS colony now hosts as many as 3,000 foreign fighters who enforce their iron rule over a 150-mile stretch of the country's coast. ISIS also has a strong presence in northeastern Libya, around the towns of Derna and Benghazi.



Ousted Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi shortly before he was murdered on Oct. 20, 2011.

Since Gaddafi's fall in 2011, Libya has exported thousands of its own extremists to support jihad in other countries. In Syria, one group of Libyan supporters of ISIS went by the name of Katibat al-Battar al Libi. One of its leaders was none other than Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the suspected organizer of the recent Paris attacks.

His connection to those Libyan fighters in Syria was first established back in January, before the killings in Paris, by Belgian researcher Pieter van Ostaeyen. On Jan. 15, Belgian police killed two members of the radical organization in the town of Verviers, where they were said to be planning a major terrorist attack.

"After the foiled attacks in Verviers in Belgium," van Ostaeyen wrote, "it became clear that the main suspect Abdelhamid Abaaoud can be linked directly to this group. His little brother Younes (aged 14 and hence probably the youngest foreign fighter in Syria) has been portrayed multiple times in the ranks of Libyan fighters in Syria."

Photos posted on van Ostaeyen's blog show grinning, bearded Belgian fighters posed for group portraits in Syria, as if on holiday. He recently observed that many Belgian jihadists were attracted to Katibat al-Battar because they emigrated from eastern Morocco, where they speak a dialect similar to that in Libya.

Last year, Washington researcher Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi called the group "the Libyan division of the Islamic State of Iraq." He added, "Libya itself has been a big source of muhajireen in both Iraq and Syria over the past decade, so the fact that there is a battalion devoted to recruiting Libyan fighters should come as no surprise. The existence of Katiba al-Bittar al-Libi as a front group for ISIS perhaps reflects a wider pro-ISIS trend across central North Africa."

Spreading Violence

A subsequent report by two members of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace commented on the role of Libyan jihadists who returned home from Syria to commit atrocities on behalf of ISIS, including car bombings, attacks on hotels and embassies, and a brutal

slaughter of Egyptian Copts. The analysts traced much of the violence to veterans of Katibat al-Battar, who were active in Derna and Benghazi:

“Libyans had already begun traveling to fight in Syria in 2011, joining existing jihadi factions or starting their own. In 2012, one group of Libyans in Syria declared the establishment of the Battar Brigade in a statement laden with anti-Shia sectarianism. The Battar Brigade founders also thanked ‘the citizens of Derna,’ a city in northeastern Libya long known as a hotbed of radical Islamism, for their support for the struggle in Syria.

“Later, the Battar Brigade fighters in Syria would pledge loyalty to the Islamic State, and fight for it in both Syria and Iraq, including against its al-Qaeda rivals. . . In the spring of 2014, many Battar Brigade fighters returned to Libya. In Derna, they reorganized themselves as the Islamic Youth Shura Council (IYSC). In September, an Islamic State delegation . . . arrived in Libya. After being received by the IYSC, they collected pledges of allegiance to the Islamic State’s self-appointed caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, from . . . fighters in Derna. They then declared eastern Libya to be a province of the Islamic State.”

The estimated 800 Battar Brigade veterans in Derna proceeded to execute local judges, journalists, army officers and anyone else deemed un-Islamic. They sent suicide bombers to Tobruk, the temporary headquarters of Libya’s national parliament, to Benghazi, and to the embassies of Egypt and United Arab Emirates in Tripoli.

New Yorker correspondent Jon Lee Anderson reported that “a rival militia loyal to Al Qaeda” wrested control of Derna from the Battar Brigade veterans this summer. “The victors are said to have marched the captured ISIS commander through the streets naked before executing him. ISIS lost Derna, but in the past few months they have taken Qaddafi’s home town of Sirte and surrounding areas in Libya’s ‘Oil Crescent,’ and have begun attacks on the outer defenses of the city of Misrata.”

Back in March 2011, while battling foes of his regime, Col. Gaddafi warned that such mayhem could follow his defeat. He told a French newspaper, “I am surprised that nobody understands that this is a fight against terrorism.” If his opponents prevailed, Gaddafi predicted, “There would be Islamic jihad in front of you in the Mediterranean.” He was right.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy chose to ignore such warnings and, with British Prime Minister David Cameron, dragged a reluctant President Barack Obama into supporting NATO strikes against Gaddafi in the name of humanitarian motives.

But in blatant violation of the United Nations Security Council mandate approving the use of force only to protect civilians, Sarkozy, Cameron, and Obama admitted in an op-ed article on April 14, 2011, that their real agenda was to oust Gaddafi “for good” so that “a new generation of leaders” could take over.

Hillary Clinton’s Boast

NATO leaders were triumphant after opponents murdered Gaddafi on Oct. 20, 2011. In the infamous words of then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, echoing Julius Caesar, “We came, we saw, he died.”

With the release of Hillary Clinton’s emails, we now know that she had learned from an adviser that France was stoking the uprising to impose a “new government of Libya to favor French firms and national interests, particularly regarding the oil industry in Libya.” France used humanitarian flights to shuttle executives from leading oil, construction and aerospace firms into the country to negotiate with the opposition so they could profit from the new order.

To this day, Clinton remains unapologetic about her strong advocacy of U.S. intervention. Yet Libya has become a lawless land fought over by 1,700 armed groups and militias. At least a third of the country’s population has been affected by the fighting and lacks adequate access to health services, according to the United Nations.

“Libya today — in spite of the expectations we had at the time of the revolution — it’s much, much worse,” one Mideast expert told PBS Frontline. “Criminality is skyrocketing. Insecurity is pervasive. There are no jobs. It’s hard to get food and electricity. There’s fighting, there’s fear. ... I see very few bright spots.”

Outside of Libya, the result of Western intervention was to spread jihadism and deadly weapons all over North Africa and the Middle East. Al Qaeda’s North African affiliate obtained vast stores of rocket-propelled anti-tank grenades, heavy machine guns, explosives, and even shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles from Gaddafi’s armories.

Bruce Hoffman, director of the Center for Security Studies at Georgetown University, said Islamist militias in the region became “armed almost to the extent of a small army” after the collapse of Libya.

In Mali, an affiliate of Al Qaeda used their new firepower to occupy the northern half of the country, impose strict Shariah law, and seize and destroy much of the historic city of Timbuktu. In November, Al Qaeda fighters stormed a luxury hotel in Mali’s capital, killing more than two dozen captives before French and Malian troops dislodged the terrorists.

Elsewhere in North Africa, reported Jon Lee Anderson, “Gunmen who trained with ISIS in Libya were involved in the murder of twenty foreign tourists at a Tunis museum in March, and thirty-eight more tourists, most of them British, at a seaside resort in Tunisia in June.”

And then there is Syria, where Libyans flocked to hone their fighting skills. In 2012 the Defense Intelligence Agency, which predicted the rise of ISIS in Syria, noted that after Gaddafi’s downfall, jihadists shipped weapons from former Libyan military stockpiles to Syria to arm Salafist rebels.

Indeed, one of the main jobs of the CIA station in Benghazi — before the devastating Sept. 11, 2012 attack on the U.S. mission there — was to track those arms shipments. The group behind

that attack, Ansar al-Sharia Benhazi, was blacklisted by the United Nations in 2014 for “links to Al-Qaeda and for running camps for the Islamist State group,” according to the *Daily Telegraph*.

First Iraq, then Libya, now Syria: Western leaders, along with their allies in the Arab states and Israel, have created multiple monsters that will threaten our societies for years to come. By all means, let us condemn those terrorists’ crimes against innocent civilians, wherever they live. But let us not forget our leaders’ complicity in helping to unleash them against us.