

Benghazi, the CIA, and the War in Libya

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The unfolding violence and chaos in Libya's second city of Benghazi should be understood as a power struggle between competing factions, each struggling to assert its own authority over the critical commercial center. However, what is purposely omitted from the Western media narrative is the fact that both groups - one a military command led by Libyan General Hifter, the other an Islamist terror group called Ansar al-Sharia - are proxies of the United States, each having received US support through a variety of channels in recent years. Seen in this way, the unrest in Libya must be understood as a continuation of the war waged against that country by the US-NATO forces.

As firefights, explosions, and air strikes become the norm in Benghazi and the surrounding areas, the nature of the conflict remains somewhat murky. On the one hand is Army General Khalifa Belqasim Haftar (also spelled Hifter), a longtime military commander under Gaddafi who fled Libya for the United States where he became a principal asset for the CIA until his return to Libya at the height of the US-NATO assault on that country. On the other hand is the Islamist Ansar al-Sharia organization, led by Ahmed Abu Khattala, which has been implicated in the September 11, 2012 attack on the US-CIA compound in Benghazi which killed US Ambassador Chris Stevens. In examining both the conflict and connections between these two individuals and the factions they lead, the fingerprints of US intelligence could not be more apparent.

However, the situation in Benghazi, and the Cyrenaica region more generally, is far more complex than simply these two factions. There are other important militias which have played a significant role in bringing the region to the brink of total war. From blockading Benghazi and Cyrenaica's oil ports to internecine conflicts within the militia movements/coalitions, these militias have made the possibility of reconciliation almost unthinkable. And so, despite the fact that the combat phase of the US-NATO war in Libya ended nearly three years ago, the country is still undeniably a war zone.

The War for Benghazi

The [news coming from Benghazi](#) is growing steadily more troubling. On Monday June 2nd, nearly one hundred Libyans, many of them being civilians, were killed or wounded in the coastal metropolis and surrounding towns when the Islamist Ansar al-Sharia militia attacked a camp occupied by forces loyal to Army General Hifter. Hifter's men, equipped with modest but effective air power including the use of combat helicopters, responded to the attack, driving off many of the Ansar al-Sharia militants. In the process however, residents of Benghazi were forced to flee or take refuge in their homes, with many businesses and schools remaining closed due to the sporadic gunfire and other fighting.

Though the clash was modest in scope in comparison to the horrors of the US-NATO war on

Libya in 2011, it is a stark reminder of the sad reality that is modern Libya – a once proud nation reduced to a patchwork of competing militias, clans, and tribes, with no central authority ruling the country, no reliable social services, and a complete absence of the rule of law. It is within this maelstrom of political and social conflict that we must examine the nature of the conflict in Benghazi.

The city has been rocked by fighting and political posturing since the overthrow and assassination of Gaddafi in 2011. While a provisional government in Tripoli was established by the so called National Transitional Council (NTC), real power on the streets was exercised by competing militias loyal to their tribal and/or clan affiliations, and usually restricted to one major town or city. Although there are a number of Islamist militias operating in or around Benghazi, the two most powerful and well organized are the [February 17 Martyrs Brigade](#) and [Ansar al-Sharia](#). While both organizations are nominally independent, each has outwardly expressed either a direct or indirect affiliation with the terror brand known as Al Qaeda.

Opposing both 17 February and Ansar al-Sharia is the so called [Libyan National Army](#), a collection of militias and smaller units loyal to General Hifter. Having recently gained notoriety for declaring a quasi-coup against the Tripoli government in February 2014, the Libyan National Army has been waging a low-intensity war against the Islamist militias in hopes of gaining control over Benghazi and the Cyrenaica region. Naturally, General Hifter's plans extend well beyond Benghazi, as he intends to use the conflict there as the pretext by which he hopes he'll bring the country under his leadership. While there are some who see this as an unlikely scenario, it is nevertheless an important part of the strategic calculus.

Finally, there is the lingering question of other militias which have, at various times, controlled critical oil terminals and port facilities in Benghazi and the East generally. Of particular note is the militia surrounding [Ibrahim al-Jathran](#), a young tribal leader who has called for regional autonomy for Cyrenaica from the central government in Tripoli. Jathran and his men have numerous times blockaded key oil facilities as a means of leveraging their demands. Though as yet they have succeeded only in causing a political and diplomatic problem for Tripoli, al-Jathran's militia, and others like it, only further complicate the endlessly complex politics of the Libyan street.

Libya's "Revolution" and US Intelligence

From the outset of the war against Libya, the United States and its NATO allies utilized a variety of terror groups and other intelligence assets to topple the Gaddafi government. While some had been directly linked to the CIA, others were pulled from the stable of terror organizations utilized at various times by the US as mujahideen in Afghanistan, Kosovo, and elsewhere. Essentially then, the US developed a loose network of proxies, some of which were ideologically opposed to the US and to one another, that it unleashed on Libya to do Washington's dirty work.

One key group allied with US intelligence is Hifter's Libyan National Army. The organization was founded by Hifter after his defection (or expulsion) from Libya in the early 1980s. From there, Hifter became a significant asset for the CIA in its quest to topple Gaddafi. Using Hifter's forces in Chad during the Libya-Chad war of the early 1980s, the CIA attempted the first of many regime change efforts in Libya. As the [New York Times](#) reported in 1991:

The secret paramilitary operation, set in motion in the final months of the

Reagan Administration, provided military aid and training to about 600 Libyan soldiers who were among those captured during border fighting between Libya and Chad in 1988...They were trained by American intelligence officials in sabotage and other guerrilla skills, officials said, at a base near Ndjamen, the Chadian capital. The plan to use the exiles fit neatly into the Reagan Administration's eagerness to topple Colonel Qaddafi.

As the above cited Times article noted, the regime change efforts failed and Hifter and his associates were then given safe passage and residence in the US. A State Department spokesman at the time [explained](#) that the men would have "access to normal resettlement assistance, including English-language and vocational training and, if necessary, financial and medical assistance." Indeed, Hifter spent nearly two decades living comfortably in a suburban Virginia home, just a short drive from CIA headquarters at Langley. He became known as the CIA's "Libya point man," having taken part in numerous regime change efforts, including the aborted attempt to overthrow Gaddafi in 1996.

And so, when Hifter conveniently showed back up in Libya to take part in the 2011 regime change operation, many political observers noted that this meant that the hand of the CIA was intimately involved in the uprising. Indeed, as the war evolved and more became known about the deeply rooted connection between US intelligence and the so called "rebels," the truth about Hifter became impossible to conceal. However, Hifter was certainly not alone in being a willing puppet of NATO and the CIA.

Another critical group in this regard is the infamous [Libyan Islamic Fighting Group \(LIFG\)](#) led by international terrorist Abdelhakim Belhadj whose credits include killing Americans in Afghanistan and beyond while being directly linked to Al Qaeda. Having been imprisoned by Gaddafi, the leadership of the LIFG immediately sought to align itself with the US in hopes of occupying the power vacuum that would emerge post-Gaddafi. Led by Belhadj, the LIFG became a critical part of the rebel movement that toppled Gaddafi, including LIFG taking the lead in the attack on Gaddafi's compound at Bab al-Aziziya. In this regard, LIFG was provided intelligence, and likely also tactical support, from US intelligence and the US military, particularly through its AFRICOM network based out of Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti.

Once Gaddafi had fallen, Belhadj became the military commander of Tripoli, temporarily acting as dictator-in-chief. However, in order to continue to sell the "Libya as democracy" mythology, Belhadj's US-NATO paymasters decided to put in his place the so called "transitional government" which is today regarded as ineffectual at best, and utterly irrelevant at worst.

The February 17 Martyrs Brigade is yet another terror group with close ties to both the "government" in Tripoli and, most importantly, to the CIA. Having emerged from the regime change operation as the most viable, well-trained, well-armed and organized militia, the February 17 Martyrs Brigade quickly rose to prominence within the post-war political landscape. Posturing as a trusted force to be employed by the authorities in Tripoli, February 17 quickly came to be a security detail for hire. It is here that the CIA and February 17 came into direct association. As the [Los Angeles Times](#) reported:

Over the last year, while assigned by their militia to help protect the U.S. mission in Benghazi, the pair had been drilled by American security personnel in using their weapons, securing entrances, climbing walls and waging hand-to-hand combat...The militiamen flatly deny supporting the assailants but acknowledge that their large, government-allied force,

known as the Feb. 17 Martyrs Brigade, could include anti-American elements...The Feb. 17 brigade is regarded as one of the more capable militias in eastern Libya.

It is essential to note that the so-called “consulate” in Benghazi was no typical diplomatic mission. Rather, it was a CIA installation likely used by Ambassador Stevens as a headquarters from which arms and fighters could be organized for the destabilization campaign in Syria. So, in examining exactly what the arrangement in Benghazi was, it would be accurate to say that the United States acted as the patron and employer for a violent terrorist organization whose own members admit that their group “could include anti-American elements.”

Ansar al-Sharia of course fit into the September 11, 2012 attack narrative, conveniently acting as the aggressors against the CIA compound defended by their sometime rivals (and sometime allies) the February 17 Martyrs Brigade. Ansar al-Sharia, headed by a man named Ahmed Abu Khattala, is reputedly the group that carried out the attack on the CIA station in Benghazi. In fact, Khattala himself admits to having been part of the assault on the compound, though he only admits to being present, not leading it.

Despite professing radical Islam that is anti-Western and rooted in the notion of sharia law, Ansar al-Sharia, and Khattala specifically, did not seem particularly troubled with collaborating with “American infidels.” In fact, as the New York Times noted in its expose, Khattala and his organization likely played the role of executioner in one of the most significant assassination operations (aside from that of Gaddafi himself) of the entire conflict.

The abduction and assassination of Libyan General Abdul Fattah Younis, until 2011 regarded as the US handpicked successor to Gaddafi, was a major turning point. As the [Times](#) explained, “After Islamists sent a team to take the general to an impromptu judicial inquiry in July 2011, his captors held him overnight in the headquarters of Mr. Abu Khattala’s brigade. The bodies of General Younes and two of his aides were found on a roadside the next day, riddled with bullets.” So, even according to mainstream accounts, Khattala and Ansar al-Sharia are at least indirectly, if not directly, responsible for the death of Younis.

This becomes particularly important in light of the long-standing competition between Younis and Hifter for control of the post-Gaddafi “secular” forces inside Libya. It would be fair then to argue that, in the power struggle between Hifter and Younis, the CIA darling Hifter was the beneficiary of the actions of a nominal terror organization. And now, these two factions are at war with each other. So goes modern Libya.

Any analysis of the current conflict in Libya, and specifically in Benghazi, must take into account the role of the US (and other nations’) intelligence agencies that have been deeply involved from the very beginning. In particular, in examining the nature of the fighting, Benghazi must be understood as both a turf war, and an ideological struggle. On the one hand, it is a competition for control over the most important city in the country with the exception of the capital in Tripoli. On the other hand, it is an existential struggle for the future of Libya. Hifter and his faction envision a mostly secular Libya open to Western financiers, speculators, and corporations. Ansar al-Sharia and the other terror groups see in Libya the building blocks of an Islamic state to be governed by sharia. And, lurking in the background, above and behind all the principal actors in the conflict, is the CIA and the US geopolitical agenda. And so the war continues; no end in sight.

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