

## US blames Libya attack on Al Qaeda-linked forces it previously backed

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*US officials investigating the September 11 attack on the US consulate in Benghazi now suspect it may have been carried out by Al Qaeda-linked forces that Washington backed during last year's NATO war to topple Libyan Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.*

*They identified Abu Sufian Ibrahim Ahmed Hamouda bin Qumu as a potential figure behind the attack, which killed four Americans, including US Ambassador to Libya J. Christopher Stevens.*

Bin Qumu is a leading member of the Ansar al-Shariah brigade in Benghazi, which has been blamed for the attack. He also reportedly is a member of the Al Qaeda-linked Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and leads the Darnah Brigade—an armed group in his home town of Darnah in northeastern Libya, which fought on the side of NATO in the war for regime change last year.

*Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius has reported that US intelligence is also investigating whether LIFG member Abdul Wahab al-Qaed al-Libi may have encouraged the attack. He is the brother of Abu Yahya al-Libi, a top Al Qaeda operations planner and LIFG member killed on June 4 of this year by a US drone strike in Mir Ali, Pakistan.

The Al Qaeda leadership did not formally acknowledge al-Libi's death until September 11, however. On that date, Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri released a video confirming that al-Libi had died in a US drone strike.

"The idea of this being revenge for Abu Yahya's death, we see discussion of that," one US intelligence official told the *Post*.

These events expose the hypocrisy of Washington's "war on terror" and its claims to be fighting for democracy in Libya. These were convenient fictions behind which the US and its allies could advance their imperialist interests—seizing \$120 billion in Libyan oil funds, taking larger stakes in Libya's oil industry, and imposing a puppet regime in Tripoli—in alliance with reactionary local proxies. These proxies included Al Qaeda forces, even as the US continued to massacre them in other parts of the world.

This cynical policy has now backfired, however, with deadly consequences for US operatives.

Accounts of the attack show that US State Department officials underestimated the threat they faced in Benghazi. There were several warnings: a June 6 bomb attack on the Benghazi consulate, a June 11 rocket-propelled grenade attack on a convoy carrying Britain's ambassador to Libya, and an August 27 State Department travel warning noting the threat

of car bombings and assassinations in Tripoli and Benghazi.

Nonetheless, Stevens argued against guarding US diplomatic facilities in Libya with Marines, who usually perform such duties. Local Libyan militias helped State Department security forces to guard the consulate in Benghazi, and no Marines were ever involved in the fighting.

Stevens took this decision to “show faith in Libya’s new leaders,” according to the *Wall Street Journal*, which wrote: “Officials say Mr. Stevens personally advised against having Marines posted at the embassy in Tripoli, apparently to avoid a militarized US presence.”

Another official, Randa Fahmy Hudome, added: “This is what happens when you’re relying on a government that’s not in control of the whole country ... [Benghazi] was awash with weapons in the hands of various brigades who were all in combat with one another. It wasn’t a secret.”

Nonetheless, the attack on the Benghazi consulate, which began at 9 p.m. local time on September 11, apparently took US diplomats by surprise. Stevens and State Department official Sean Smith died of smoke inhalation, while trying to flee a safe room that filled with smoke after attackers set fire to the consulate. After surviving officials went to a secret safe house, where they met other US personnel in Benghazi and a State Department security team flown in from Tripoli, the safe house itself came under heavy and accurate mortar fire.

Newspaper accounts suggest the attackers outmaneuvered the US officials. The *New York Times* wrote, “The attackers had lain in wait, silently observing as the rescuers, including eight State Department civilians who had just landed at the airport in Benghazi, arrived in large convoys. This second attack was shorter in duration than the first, but more complex and sophisticated. It was an ambush.”

The attackers apparently suffered no casualties, but two US guards—former Navy SEALs Tyrone Woods and Glen Doherty—were killed.

If bin Qumu and al-Libi indeed helped organize the attacks with forces under their command, it would be for the United States a case of the chickens coming home to roost. Having crossed and double-crossed Al Qaeda forces in Libya and internationally—murdering, imprisoning, and torturing them, when it was not employing their services in various dirty wars—it is now facing the consequences of having armed and handed power to them in much of Libya.

Abdelhakim Belhadj, reportedly the LIFG’s founder, emerged as the leader of the Tripoli Military Council after Tripoli fell to NATO-backed forces in August. His forces are reportedly now serving with the Syrian Free Army, the US-backed force fighting the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Belhadj began his career fighting alongside Osama bin Laden with the CIA-backed Islamist *mujahedin* in the Soviet-Afghan war during the 1980s. Together with other veterans of that war, he founded the LIFG during the 1990s and launched an armed uprising against Gaddafi in 1995 that was suppressed. He escaped and helped run Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan before the September 11 attacks, after which he traveled to Pakistan, Iraq, and Malaysia, where he was captured in 2003 and rendered to a CIA prison in Thailand, where he was tortured.

In 2004, Belhadj was turned over to the Libyan government, which released him and other detained LIFG leaders in 2010, when they pledged to renounce armed struggle. One year later, Washington turned to Belhadj's forces to topple Gaddafi. Some of these same forces have been brought into Syria to fight in the US-backed war to topple the government of Bashar al-Assad.

As for bin Qumu, he escaped prison in Libya and fled to a camp run by bin Laden in Afghanistan in the early 1990s; he was captured in Pakistan after the September 11 attacks. Accused of being a LIFG member, he was imprisoned for over five years at the Guantánamo Bay prison camp. US officials there cited Libyan intelligence reports that he was "known as one of the extremist commanders of the Afghan Arabs"—that is, a foreign fighter trained in Afghanistan—and as a "dangerous man with no qualms about committing terrorist acts."

The United States rendered bin Qumu in 2007 to Libya, which later released him. During the Libyan war, the *New York Times* praised him as a "notable figure" in the US war effort, in an April 24, 2011 article titled "Libyan, Once a Detainee, Is Now a US Ally of Sorts."

Washington relied on bin Qumu and similar forces even though it was well aware of his personal history. The *Times* commented, "The former enemy and prisoner of the United States is now an ally of sorts, in a remarkable turnaround resulting from shifting American policies rather than any obvious change in Mr. Qumu."

At the time, US officials who spoke to the *Times* downplayed the risks arising from their alliance with LIFG fighters: "We're more worried about Al Qaeda infiltration from outside than indigenous ones. Most of them have a local agenda, so they don't present as much of a threat to the West."

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