

WHAT ARE THE SECRETS THAT WILL REMAIN HIDDEN IN BENGHAZI?

Things are becoming clearer day by day in Libya. groups and brigades are polarizing along Islamist-jihadist-secular lines

US drones are not only hovering all the time over eastern Libya, they also bombed a training camp run by Abdulbasit Azuz, a commander from Derna.

Yes, you heard that right, US drones are bombing Libya already

The above June 8, 2012 quote, apparently from an extremist discussion board, is among the materials (see PDF 119) the State Department used to investigate the Benghazi attack (Darrell Issa released them after last year's Benghazi hearing). While the screen cap of the discussion entry comes with no explanation, it appears to show someone at State was tracking the rise of extremists in real time, particularly the day after an earlier IED attack on the US mission in Benghazi claimed by the Imprisoned Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman Brigades (see PDF 110 for State's description of that).

But it wouldn't take reading Jihadist sites to understand what they were saying the summer before the September 11 attack on Benghazi. CNN's June 7 coverage of the attack on the mission included many of the same details.

A senior Libyan official told CNN that the U.S. is flying surveillance missions with drones over suspected jihadist training camps in eastern Libya because of concerns over rising activity by al Qaeda and like-minded groups in the region but said that to the best of his knowledge, they had not been used to

fire missiles at militant training camps in the area.

The revelation follows a failed attack on the U.S. Mission in Benghazi on Tuesday night, which a shadowy jihadist group claimed was to avenge the death of al Qaeda No. 2 Abu Yahya al-Libi.

The official said that one militant commander operating in Derna, Abdulbasit Azuz, had complained that a drone strike had targeted his training camp in the east of Libya. Last month, there were reports of explosions outside the Derna area in the vicinity of the camps, according to a different source.

[snip]

The senior Libyan official said it would be bad if such a strike had occurred. He added that the Americans' use of drones in a surveillance capacity had been discussed at the top level of the transitional Libyan government.

As CNN has reported, Azuz is a senior al Qaeda operative and longtime close associate of the group's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was dispatched to Libya from the tribal areas of Pakistan in spring 2011, according to several sources. There, he subsequently recruited fighters.

[snip]

The jihadist group that claimed responsibility for the failed attack on the U.S. Mission in leaflets left at the scene called itself the Imprisoned Omar Abdul Rahman Brigades. It promised more attacks against American interests.

It was first heard from late last month, when it claimed responsibility for an attack on a Red Cross office in Benghazi. A purported video of the

attack was apparently posted on jihadist websites that regularly feature statements by al Qaeda. The video showed several rockets being fired into a building at night.

While CNN doesn't make an explicit connection between the bombing of the Benghazi mission and US surveillance (and claimed drone attack) in Derna, the implication is they're related, particularly as they track Libyans with ties to core al Qaeda (CNN also discusses former Gitmo detainee Sufian bin Qumu's presence in Derna) responding to the drone killing in Pakistan of Abu Yahya al-Libi on June 5.

So on June 5 we killed Abu Yahya in Pakistan, on June 6 an unknown militia attacks the compound in Benghazi in retaliation and promises more attacks, on June 7 discussions of the attack tie back to claims we launched a drone strike in Derna.

On September 10, 2012, the day before the Benghazi attack, Ayman al Zawahiri, who had sent Azuz to Derna to set up an al Qaeda presence the year before, confirmed the death of Abu Yahya.

I lay all this out because, even as State and CIA continue to bicker over who is responsible for the bureaucratic failures that led to Ambassador Stevens' death in Benghazi, there seems to be larger underlying issues that remain unspoken.

That's a claim made explicitly in the ebook by two former Special Operations fighters that purports to present the "Definitive Report" on Benghazi (and described here). The book has its limitations: it presents a very CIA-friendly view (in part because it's written to champion the two CIA contractors who were killed in the attack), and as such obscures many of the actions and inactions from militia and contractors leading up to the attack.

It suggests the attack on Benghazi was largely blowback from JSOC operations run out of the

White House.

Meanwhile, JSOC counterterrorism operations began sometime in mid-summer 2012, when the organization started putting “boots on the ground” inside Libya.

[snip]

The nature of these operations remains highly classified. They were never intended to be known to anyone outside a very small circle in the Special Operations community and within Obama’s National Security Council. Ambassador Stevens, the CIA Chief of Station in Tripoli, and then-Director, General Petraeus, had little if any knowledge of these JSOC missions.

The book goes onto blame John Brennan, by name, for not alerting CIA and State within Libya to what JSOC was doing (the ebook was released the week Brennan’s confirmation process started, though was not mentioned explicitly in open hearing).

Kept in the dark about these compartmentalized JSOC operations the CIA was caught off-guard by the Ansar al-Sharia retaliation. They had no idea that Special Operations missions would be kicking the hornets’ nest in Libya and therefore could not prepare for the fallout that would result.

[snip]

Because John Brennan is running his own private war, he is not going through the normal chain of command, and operations are not deconflicted. Ambassador Stevens, for example, was not read into the JSOC operations in Libya. Likewise, the CIA never knew what hit them.

[snip]

Ambitious bureaucrats like John Brennan need to be reined in or fired if these operations are to be successful, or we will see plenty more Benthazis happen.

It also speculates in suggestive fashion about Bin Qumu.

Given that Bin Qumu was released from Gitmo before taking control of Ansar al-Sharia, one must ask whether or not American intelligence services had “flipped” him while he was held in duress while at the Guantanamo Bay prison facility. Is the Libyan terrorist a double, or even triple agent?

There are a number of reasons that I won’t go into why I think the suggestion that Bin Qumu had been flipped is not at all far-fetched (here’s an earlier post I did on Bin Qumu).

But as to whether it’s credible to claim CIA was not read into operations that were pissing off militias in eastern Libya, remember the claim David Petraeus’ mistress, Paula Broadwell, made in a speech attempting to defend his role in Benthazi, two weeks before he resigned in disgrace.

Now, I don’t know if a lot of you heard this, but the CIA annex had actually, um, had taken a couple of Libyan militia members prisoner and they think that the attack on the consulate was an effort to try to get these prisoners back. So that’s still being vetted.

The challenging thing for General Petraeus is that in his new position, he’s not allowed to communicate with the press. So he’s known all of this – they had correspondence with the CIA station chief in, in Libya. Within 24 hours they kind of knew what was happening.

[snip]

As a former intel officer it's frustrating to me because it reveals our sources and methods. I don't think the public necessarily needs to know all of that.

See also this post, which maps how Fox's reporting on the same subject changed over time, but also considers how the reported presence of prisoners at the CIA mission affected militias' willingness to help defend the State and CIA compounds. Fox suggests that CIA's hand-picked militia, February 17 brigade, used the attack to free captives, rather than defend Americans. (Remember, too, that Ambassador Stevens was taken to a hospital guarded by Ansar al-Sharia; how he was located and his body reclaimed is one of the vaguest parts of any of the accounts of the attack.)

As to Broadwell's blabbing about detainees at the CIA annex in Benghazi, as recently as April 10, Petraeus was being interviewed by the FBI about whether he shared classified information with Broadwell.

Now, as a threshold matter, note the language Broadwell used. She didn't say CIA was holding two militia figures. She said the CIA annex had taken them prisoner.

CIA's response to Broadwell's blabbing was to issue the same kind of non-denial denial they issued after Jeremy Scahill revealed CIA surrogates were operating a prison for the Agency in Somalia.

The CIA has not had detention authority since January 2009, when Executive Order 13491 was issued. Any suggestion that the Agency is still in the detention business is uninformed and baseless.

See also this tweet, repeating CIA's denial that the Agency itself was holding prisoners.

Now, in her comments, Broadwell seems to suggest

Petraeus learned about detainees in Benghazi within 24 hours of the attack.

But just days after she would blab about the trip and just days before he resigned in disgrace, Petraeus took his own fact-finding trip to Libya, even as Deputy CIA Director Mike Morrell was in Langley spinning out CIA's defense. Yet, in spite of the fact that Petraeus took the trip ostensibly to prepare for Congressional testimony, the intelligence committees had trouble getting a copy of his trip report, and Petraeus tried to back out of testifying about the trip personally. Not only does this feel like a concerted effort to withhold what he learned from Congress, but if the CIA Station Chief told Petraeus something significantly different in person in October from what he told him via cable on September 12, I can see why Petraeus might use his resignation as an excuse not to tell Congress.

I'm wondering, too, whether this relates to Mac Thornberry's attempt to assure everyone there's sufficient oversight over JSOC kill-or-capture missions; if Brennan kept JSOC ops in Libya that blew up on us too closely held, Thornberry would likely have been one of the few to have been read into them. Remember that the government keeps refusing to tell Ron Wyden all the countries where we've been running targeted killing missions.

And remember, too, that Petraeus' first reaction to Benghazi was to ask for more drones, a request that John Brennan approved.

Now, I don't know whether Petraeus' behavior makes the claim that he and the Station Chief weren't read into what was going on in eastern Libya more or less likely.

But Petraeus' role in this has always been creepy, from when he refused to attend the memorial services for the CIA contractors killed in the attack to when he ostentatiously attended the Argo premiere the night of Darrell Issa's first hearing on Benghazi. And it is clear that

Petraeus' efforts to spin his own role, and that of CIA, in this really pissed off the rest of the National Security establishment.

Given that Petraeus appears to be willing to reopen this issue, we might one day find out the underlying explanation for Benghazi.