More questions than answers after US commandos seize Benghazi attack suspect

Patrick Martin
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The Pentagon announced Tuesday that Special Forces commandos had seized Ahmed Abu Khattala, a Libyan citizen and resident of Benghazi, and transported him to a US Navy ship in the Mediterranean, where he is undergoing interrogation by a team of FBI and military intelligence investigators.

At the same time, the US Justice Department made public a secret indictment of Khattala, charging him with three counts of involvement in the September 11, 2012 attacks on a US mission and a nearby CIA annex in Benghazi in which four Americans died, including US Ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens. One of the charges will be "killing a person in the course of an attack on a federal facility," which could carry the death penalty.

The prisoner will be brought to the United States, officials said, to stand trial before a federal court. The Obama administration rebuffed calls by congressional Republicans for Khattala to be jailed at the Guantanamo Bay concentration camp and tried before a military tribunal.

While media apologists for Obama have suggested that his reliance on the FBI and federal courts marked a significant departure from the policies of the Bush administration, Sunday's raid in Libya was as gross a violation of international law as any CIA rendition. The FBI has no jurisdiction in Libya, which is a sovereign state, and the US is not at war with Libya, so the actions of the Delta Force commandos are equally lawless.

The Libyan government—placed in power by the US-NATO war that overthrew the Gaddafi regime in 2011—immediately denounced the American kidnapping of one of its citizens, demanding that Khattala be returned to his own country.

This is the second such US commando raid on a Libyan city, following the abduction of Nazih Abdul-Hamed al-Ruqai, known as Anas al-Libi, from Tripoli, the capital city, last October. Ruqai is currently in prison in New York awaiting trial on charges related to the 1998 bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

A US official who briefed the press under condition of anonymity emphasized that the Libyan government was not informed of the raid in Benghazi and did not give its approval. "I am not going to get into the specifics of our diplomatic discussions," the official said, "but to be clear: This was a unilateral U.S. operation."

Virtually every aspect of the Khattala affair is murky, in keeping with the curtain of lies and distortions that surround the Benghazi attacks, in both the accounts offered by the Obama administration and the increasingly strident denunciations coming from Obama's critics in the Republican Party.

While Obama issued a statement hailing the detention of Khattala and saluting the bravery of the Delta Force commandos who captured him near Benghazi, there is no indication that the Islamist militant was in hiding, or that he offered any resistance.

Khattala apparently was living in his own home in the el-Leithi neighborhood of Benghazi, where he worked full-time as a building contractor, while moonlighting as the leader of a small militia band—estimated at no more than two dozen men—one of thousands of such micro-groups that have sprung up in Libya since the ouster of Gaddafi.

Western reporters interviewed him on several occasions, portraying him as a local eccentric who had been on the scene at the time of the 2012 attacks on the US mission and CIA annex, but who denied any active or leading role.

The *New York Times* published an interview with Khattala on October 18, 2012, only a month after the attack. CNN ran an audio interview with him in May 2013 (he declined to go on camera), sitting down with Khattala for two hours at a local café. The *Times* followed up with a detailed profile as part of a feature report on the Benghazi attack published December 29, 2013.

In other words, this was not Osama bin Laden hiding in

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a cave in Afghanistan, changing locations constantly to avoid detection. He told his CNN interviewer, Arwa Damon, that he had not been contacted by any Libyan or American officials despite being an eyewitness to some of the events of September 11, 2012. “Even the investigative team did not try to contact me,” he told Damon, referring to the FBI.

In its report on Khattala’s capture and removal from Libya, the *Times* wrote: “Khattala is a local, small-time Islamist militant. He has no known connections to international terrorist groups, say American officials briefed on the criminal investigation and intelligence reporting, and other Benghazi Islamists and militia leaders who have known him for many years.”

This did not stop the Obama administration from portraying his arrest in near-apocalyptic terms, as a tremendous blow against terrorism and proof that, as Obama put it, “With this operation, the United States has once again demonstrated that we will do whatever it takes to see that justice is done when people harm Americans.”

The timing of the arrest of Khattala raises a number of questions. Given his lack of concealment in Benghazi, and the fact that he was not protected by a substantial armed force, if any, it seems likely that US special forces could have seized him more or less at will. As CNN noted, he was “really not that difficult to find.”

The arrest provided a blast of favorable publicity for the Obama administration in the midst of the debacle in Iraq, and it also served as response to the empaneling of a select committee by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives to conduct yet another investigation into the 2012 events in Benghazi, which have become a near-obsession of the US ultra-right.

The seizure of Khattala coincided with military moves on the ground in Benghazi, as the forces of the US-backed general Khalifa al-Hiftar launched attacks on Ansar al-Shariah, the powerful militia that dominates much of eastern Libya and has been accused by the US government of responsibility for the Benghazi attacks.

On Sunday, during the hours before the commando raid that captured Khattala, at least 57 people were killed and 72 wounded in fighting around Benghazi, according to a report in the *Libyan Herald*. This suggests that the Delta Force operation was coordinated with the forces of Hiftar, a former general under Gaddafi who went into exile and lived for several decades in Langley, Virginia, where the CIA is headquartered.

What the Obama administration, its Republican critics, and the corporate-controlled US media all seek to conceal about the Benghazi affair is that Ambassador Stevens was apparently killed by the same Islamic militants that the US had used as its shock troops against Gaddafi and which the CIA was then engaged in redeploying to Syria to join the Islamic insurgency against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

In this connection, it must be pointed out that the CIA “annex” in Benghazi was actually the main US government operation in the city, while the US mission, manned by a handful of State Department officers, was strictly window dressing. The real business of US imperialism in eastern Libya—mobilizing Islamist fighters for transport to Syria, along with extensive supplies of weapons seized from Gaddafi’s arsenals—was run by the intelligence agency.

That is why the “annex” could be successfully defended against attack—it was heavily fortified and had heavily armed US mercenaries for security—while the mission was left in the hands of hired Libyan guards who fled as soon as an angry crowd began forming outside.

In other words, Benghazi is another episode of blowback from the cynical maneuvers of US imperialism in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia, in which Al Qaeda was first created with the assistance of the CIA in Afghanistan, then demonized after 9/11 as the pretext for US military interventions, and subsequently recruited as US proxy forces in wars for regime change in Libya and Syria.

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