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By [Guy Taylor](#) and [Shaun Waterman](#) - The Washington Times

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Senior State Department, defense and intelligence officials were well aware that Benghazi and its surrounding area harbored al Qaeda-linked extremists long before the Sept. 11 terrorist attack on the U.S. Consulate in the eastern Libyan city.

Benghazi became famous last year as the birthplace of the revolution that swept Libyan strongman Moammar Gadhafi from power.

But in recent interviews with The Washington Times, several former high-level officials explained that eastern Libya was notorious in Washington's counterterrorism community for more than a decade as a hub for jihadists leaving for or returning from insurgencies abroad.

The agencies' long-standing knowledge about Islamic extremists in Benghazi raises questions about the level of security at the U.S. Consulate on Sept. 11, when heavily armed militants stormed the diplomatic mission and a CIA annex and killed U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, State Department officer Sean Smith, and former Navy SEALs Tyrone Woods and Glen Doherty.

The officials pointed to the 2007 seizure by coalition forces in Iraq of a treasure trove of documents that highlighted the town of Darnah, just east of Benghazi, as one of the top destinations in the world from which foreign fighters were recruited to join al Qaeda's insurgency against U.S. troops in Iraq.

In 2008, a secret cable from a U.S. diplomat in Libya, later posted by WikiLeaks, reported that many people in Darnah "take great pride" in their town's public reputation as the source for such large numbers of foreign fighters and suicide bombers — "invariably referred to as 'martyrs,'" the cable reads.

The association of Darnah and Benghazi with violent jihad goes back much further than the insurgency in Iraq, and predates even the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the U.S.

Always a hotbed

Eastern Libya was home to many Libyans who had left to join the first global jihadist insurgency — against the Soviets in Afghanistan in 1980s, said Aaron Y. Zelin, a scholar at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

In the 1990s, Libyan veterans of the Afghan jihad launched an insurgency in eastern Libya under the banner of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, which Gadhafi forces crushed. The group split with al Qaeda after the Sept. 11 attacks, predicting that they would be disastrous for the global jihadist movement.

"Benghazi and Darnah were always viewed as an Islamist hotbed," said Mr. Zelin, noting that extremists are not the majority in either town.

The documents recovered in 2007 in Iraq, which came to be known as the Sinjar records — named after a town on the Syrian-Iraqi border where the material was seized from an al Qaeda commander — included the identities and hometowns of hundreds of foreign fighters in Iraq.

"The info was picked up by special ops, and a very powerful decision was made not to treat it as intel but to declassify it and give it to the State Department so that it could be dealt with from a diplomatic approach and then to release the information academically," said one former official with intimate knowledge of the discovery.

The result was a two-part report produced by the Combating Terrorism Center at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y.

Titled "Al Qaeda's Foreign Fighters in Iraq," the report showed that Libya ranked second only to Saudi Arabia as a country of origin for foreign fighters. The data shocked many U.S. analysts, who previously had not assessed Libya as a significant source of foreign jihadists.

Of 112 Libyans identified, 52 had come from Darnah and 21 from Benghazi, according to the report,

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At that time, Gadhafi, eager to regain international legitimacy after having abandoned his country's weapons of mass destruction programs, was offering to cooperate with the U.S. on counterterrorism.

So when a multiagency team headed by the State Department was dispatched to brief intelligence, security and foreign affairs officials in Arab capitals during the winter of 2007 about the Sinjar report, the Libyan capital of Tripoli was one of its stops.

The former official recalled that in Tripoli a very high-level member of Gadhafi's inner circle took umbrage when asked why more wasn't being done to crack down on extremists in eastern Libya.

"He was pretty defensive in his response, and I remember him getting pretty sharp in saying 'The whole eastern province has always brought us trouble,' and 'Three times we've brought conventional ground forces in there to try and quell these insurrectionist groups, and we'll never get there,'" the former official said.

"That really set the tone for me at the time about the challenges posed by the region," the former official said. "And now, five years later, we have what's gone on in Benghazi."

A convoluted path

The path from the Iraqi insurgency to the Sept. 11 attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi is a long and twisted trek.

By the time the U.S. delegation arrived in Tripoli in 2008, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group had splintered, said Mr. Zelin, the Washington Institute scholar.

Several of its imprisoned and exiled leaders had taken part in peace talks opened by Gadhafi's son, Seif al-Islam, in 2005, and others effectively latched onto al Qaeda in 2007.

The revolution that toppled Gadhafi and the other Arab Spring rebellions sparked another wave of extremism in eastern Libya, fueled by veterans of the revolution's militias and still exporting jihadists — these days to Syria.

"You have a new generation [of extremists] now who never went through the hardships, defeats and mistakes of the 1990s," Mr. Zelin said.

The jihadist group in Benghazi thought to have been pre-eminent in calling for the hastily organized attack on the U.S. diplomatic mission, Katibat Ansar al-Shariah Benghazi, or "the Benghazi brigade of the supporters of Islamic law," is led by Mohammed al-Zawahiri and announced its formation after Gadhafi's overthrow, Mr. Zelin said.

Katibat Ansar al-Shariah Benghazi was one of several Islamist groups that paraded heavy weapons through Benghazi in June, prompting a cable from Stevens who reported their rise in eastern Libya and displays of "the al Qaeda flag" over buildings in Darnah.

He also noted an attack that month on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, where a homemade bomb ripped a hole in a security wall. Jihadists claimed responsibility for the attack, but the cable made no reference to any U.S. attempt to investigate.

A political firestorm

The deep roots of violent jihadism in eastern Libya have been largely ignored in the political firestorm over the attack that killed Stevens and the other three Americans.

Republicans have accused the Obama administration of initially attributing the attack to spontaneous protests over a U.S.-made anti-Islam video in order to maintain the president's foreign policy image before Election Day and not undermine his campaign message that al Qaeda had been decimated.

U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan E. Rice became the lightning rod for criticism because she trumpeted that line on the Sunday TV talk shows five days after the attack.

At the end of September, the director of national intelligence, in an unprecedented public comment on the intelligence process, noted that initial assessments "continue to evolve" and that the attack in fact

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The issue, which sputtered during the election campaign, was reignited last month after Mrs. Rice was mentioned as a possible successor to Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Several former officials said the years-old and publicly available information exposing Benghazi and Darnah as hotbeds of al Qaeda-linked activity raises more serious national security questions that deserve the attention of Congress.

Intelligence and investigation

"There was certainly more than enough evidence that there were extremist and al Qaeda groups that were operating in eastern Libya," said Nick Dowling, who served on President Clinton's National Security Council and now runs the consulting firm IDS International LLC.

"The key question from an investigation standpoint is how was that information shared and fused within the U.S. government and in what form did it filter into the State Department Regional Security Officer's plan for its posture at the Benghazi consulate," said Mr. Dowling. "I think that's a very fair question to ask in considering how we could have done that more effectively."

Former officials note that, unlike in Afghanistan and Iraq, where U.S.-backed campaigns resulted in regime change and a new government proved unable to stabilize security, there was no major U.S. military presence in Libya.

Eric Nordstrom, who was in charge of diplomatic security on the ground in Libya, told a pre-election congressional hearing that pleas for additional security in Tripoli and Benghazi were rejected at State Department headquarters.

How much security?

Several former diplomatic and military officials expressed skepticism to The Times that anything short of a large-scale U.S. military presence in Benghazi would have been able to stop the consular compound from being overrun on Sept. 11.

"There's not much you can do, if 80 or 100 [extremists] attack a small facility with mortars and [rocket-propelled grenades]," said Michael B. Kraft, a former State Department counterterrorism adviser. "In my view, this [attack] would have overwhelmed any reasonable security presence."

Outside of war zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. diplomatic facilities generally rely on a mix of locally contracted security guards and the police and security forces of the host country. In post-Gadhafi Libya, a nation awash in small arms and heavy military hardware, that meant hiring local militias to provide security for the consulate.

"No matter what countermeasures you put in place, they can always be outgunned," said Mr. Kraft, who retired in 2004 and recently wrote the first unclassified guide to the organizational structure of the overall U.S. counterterrorism effort.

With automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenade launchers, the militants carrying out the Benghazi attack likely would have "exceeded the fire power of a typical diplomatic post defense," former State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley told The Times in September.

But even a small military force can make a big difference under the right circumstances, said retired Army Col. Thomas F. Lynch III, a special adviser on counterterrorism to Navy Adm. Mike Mullen when he was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Tactical details like lines of fire, setback distance between the buildings and the street, and other objects that provide cover for attackers "are just as important as the numbers" in determining the outcome of any firefight, said Mr. Lynch, whose decade of work in the region included being responsible for the security of military facilities in the Persian Gulf.