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Paris: Made in Libya, not Syria?

 BY [PETER LEE](#) on [NOVEMBER 24, 2015](#) in [ASIA TIMES NEWS & FEATURES](#), [AT OPINION](#), [MIDDLE EAST](#)

Using the criterion *cui bono* (who benefits?) to the Paris outrage, one notes an apparent shortage of “bono” to ISIL, unless the thinking of the leadership runs to: “It would be an excellent idea to focus the fury of the West upon us here in Iraq instead of laying low and letting the West go along with the GCC/Turkish plan of quagmiring Russia in Syria.”

Doesn't make too much sense. Which is why, in my opinion, is why you see a lot of metaphysical hand waving that the real motive for the attacks was to erase the Muslim “grey zone,” provoke a fatal over-reaction from the West, contribute to the agonies of the Syrian refugees in Europe, rend the time-space continuum and thereby bring the Crusaders to their knees, etc.

Media and analyst coverage appears determined to overlay a profitable traffic-building and mission-enhancing narrative of “Western civilization under attack by ISIL,” and ignore the factors that point to the attack as a murderous local initiative, not by ISIL or the mythical immigrant threat, but by alienated Muslim citizens of the EU. The rhetoric of righteous, united fury against a monstrosity committed by the external “other,” perhaps, is easier to digest than the awkward theme of national minorities committing extreme acts of violence against societies they believe oppress and marginalize them.



An Islamist attacker holds a weapon as the US Consulate in Benghazi, Libya, burns on Sept. 11, 2012

So we get lots about the horrors of ISIL and relatively little about the, to me, rather eye-opening statistic that while 8% of the population of France is Muslim, it is **estimated** that 70% of the prison population is. I suppose it would be churlish to explore the issue of blowback from French penal and social policies at this juncture. But there is some interesting data that places the alleged and now apparently deceased mastermind, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, in context concerning the degree of his allegiance to ISIL.

Abaaoud, a citizen of Belgium of Moroccan descent, was well known as a violent radical miscreant linked to an Islamic cell in Verviers, Belgium, that did all sorts of mean, murderous crap. As far as Belgian and French authorities were concerned, he had been an item long before Paris.

In an article with the, in retrospect, bitterly ironic title “Second Paris averted by hours” (the “first Paris” referencing the Charlie Hebdo murders), the *Daily Mail* reported in January 2015 on a raid in Verviers, Belgium, the one Abaaoud famously evaded.

The Belgian terror cell linked to the Islamic State (Isis) group, which was raided by police

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overnight, was plotting to either take a passenger bus hostage or behead a member of Belgian authority such as a policeman or a magistrate, according to local media reports.

So, in January Abaaoud was going to behead a policeman, or maybe hijack a passenger bus.

After Abaaoud **was linked** to the Paris outrage, the Verviers activities were retroactively upgraded to “major terrorist attack”:

Abaaoud was the main target of a major police raid on a terrorist cell in Verviers, Belgium, in January in which two jihadists were killed. It was carried out within days of the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, though police said the two events were not linked.

In July he was sentenced to 20 years in absentia along with 32 other jihadists. The Belgian cell was said to have been planning a major terrorist attack, including abducting and beheading a prominent law enforcement official and posting a video of it online.

Police believe Abaaoud helped arrange a terrorist attack on an Amsterdam to Paris train on August 21, which was thwarted by four passengers including British businessman Chris Norman. The French newspaper Liberation claimed he was in contact with Ayoub El-Khazzani, the man who opened fire in a carriage of the train before he was overwhelmed by passengers.

For some perspective on whether or not the November outrage in Paris could be ginned up locally, as opposed to orchestrated out of Raqqa, the January *Daily Mail* article reminds us of how the Charlie Hedbo attackers acquired their gear:

Police said earlier this week that automatic weapons and a rocket launcher used in the Charlie Hebdo and Kosher supermarket attacks in Paris were purchased from Belgian gangs.

The Scorpion machine gun and the Tokarev handgun used by Amedy Coulibaly during his attack on the kosher supermarket which resulted in the deaths of four Jewish Parisians came from Brussels and Charleroi.

And the Kalashnikovs and rocket launchers used by the Kouachi brothers to attack the offices of the Charlie Hebdo magazine, killing 12, were purchased by Coulibay near the Gare du Midi in Brussels for less than 4000 English pounds.

Yes, apparently you can go down to the train station in Brussels and purchase a rocket launcher.

A recent Reuters story back-of-the-enveloped costs for the November Paris murder spree at perhaps US\$7500. So, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, radicalized Euro-thug of Moroccan descent, or ISIS's chosen instrument for the destruction of Western civilization?

The indispensable first stop is the blog of a Belgian researcher, Pieter van Ostaeyen. He writes about radicalized Belgian Muslims. Back in January, **he had a post** that mentioned Abdelhamid Abaaoud:

It seems fair to state that there is a rather strong connection between an important part of the Belgian ISIS fighters and the supposedly Libyan brigade of ISIS.

After the foiled attacks in Verviers in Belgium on January 8, 2015, it became clear that the main suspect Abdelhamid Abaaoud can be linked directly to this group. His little brother Younes (aged 14 and hence probably the youngest foreign fighter in Syria) has been portrayed multiple times in the ranks of Libyan fighters in Syria.

Van Ostaeyen has a lot of interesting pictures from social media about the “supposedly Libyan brigade of ISIS,” which goes by the name “Katibat al-Battar al-Libi.” The pictures make fighting in Syria look like Spring Break for radicalized Islamic bros, with the advantage that you get to blow things up and kill people, and the disadvantage that people can kill you.

Van Ostaeyen's most remarkable get is a photograph of a list of martyrs from the brigade including the names of eight fighters surnamed “el-Belgiki,” presumably because they were ex-Belgium. That's about 20% of the fatalities listed.

Van Ostaeyen's also **quoted** in a post-Paris NYT backgrounder. It provides an interesting insight on why Abaaoud might fall in with a Libyan outfit:

Abdelhamid Abaaoud is suspected of being a leader of a branch of the Islamic State in Syria called Katibat al-Battar al Libi, which has its origins in Libya. This particular branch has attracted

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many Belgian fighters because of language and cultural ties, said Pieter van Ostaeyen, who tracks Belgian militants.

Many Belgian Muslims are of Moroccan origin, he said, and speak a dialect found in eastern Morocco that is similar to a Libyan dialect. Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, who studies jihadi groups at the Middle East Forum, a research center in Washington, said there was no evidence yet that the Paris attacks had been ordered by Adhni or the Islamic State's overall leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

But he added that the soldiers at Libyan branch that includes Abaaoud has played a prominent role in exporting violence. One of their tasks he said, has been to organize plots that "involved foreign fighters, sleeper cells in Europe that were connected with an operative inside of Syria and Iraq, usually in a lower to midlevel position."

At the end of his January blogpost, van Ostaeyen [links to a piece](#) by Aymenn al-Tamimi (who's also quoted in the *Times* piece above) on Joshua Landis' website. You go there and you find a brief 2014 piece about Katibat al-Battar al-Libi:

This group, which has existed at least since the summer of last year, is the Libyan division of the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS), despite false rumors that the battalion had defected to Jabhat al-Nusra. Libya itself has been a big source of muhajireen in both Iraq and Syria over the past decade, so the fact that there is a battalion devoted to recruiting Libyan fighters should come as no surprise. The existence of Katiba al-Bittar al-Libi as a front group for ISIS perhaps reflects a wider pro-ISIS trend across central North Africa with the Ansar ash-Shari'a movements in Tunisia and Libya.

This military formation, which Abaaoud fought with, predates the emergence of ISIS by at least a year.

The Carnegie Endowment for Peace, in a [March 2015 report](#) discussed the formation as "the Battar Brigade," and indicated that it was rather deeply embedded in the Islamist social, political, and financial matrix of post-Gaddafi Libya:

Libyans had already begun traveling to fight in Syria in 2011, joining existing jihadi factions or starting their own. In 2012, one group of Libyans in Syria declared the establishment of the Battar Brigade in a statement laden with anti-Shia sectarianism. The Battar Brigade founders also thanked "the citizens of Derna," a city in northeastern Libya long known as a hotbed of radical Islamism, for their support for the struggle in Syria.

Later, the Battar Brigade fighters in Syria would pledge loyalty to the Islamic State, and fight for it in both Syria and Iraq, including against its al-Qaeda rivals. In April 2014, the Battar Brigade announced the "martyrdom" of 25 of its fighters in a Nusra Front suicide attack on an Islamic State location.

In the spring of 2014, many Battar Brigade fighters returned to Libya. In Derna, they reorganized themselves as the Islamic Youth Shura Council (IYSC). In September, an Islamic State delegation, including the Yemeni Abu al-Bara al-Azdi and the Saudi Abu Habib al-Jazrawi, arrived in Libya. After being received by the IYSC, they collected pledges of allegiance to the Islamic State's self-appointed caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, from IYSC-aligned fighters in Derna. They then declared eastern Libya to be a province of the Islamic State, calling it Wilayat Barqa, or the Cyrenaica Province.

Katibat al-Battar al-Libi, in other words, was formed as a rather bloody piece of outreach by Libyan Islamists to share Libya experience in insurrection and revolution with Syria. After IS arose and became a dominant military and financial force, the "KBL" threw in their lot with ISIS, and members of the brigade subsequently returned to Libya to establish an IS beachhead.

A [July 2015 study](#) by Small Arms Survey confirms the autonomous character of Katibat al-Battar al-Libi.

While the uncertain relationship between JAN and IS was being clarified, Libyans stayed 'outside' the fray, remaining in their own units and not integrating into other IS hierarchies or command structures. In Latakia for instance, Libyans kept their own separate battalion (The Daily Star, 2013). As the split between JAN and IS deepened, Libyans chose IS but remained apart, forming the Katibat al-Battar al-Libiya (KBL) (The Libyan al-Battar Brigade), under the

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auspices of IS. Since its formation, the KBL has been active in eastern Syria, notably in Al Hasakah and Deir az-Zor. The battalion maintained links with Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, an early and prominent supporter of IS. Ansar al-Sharia proved to be an excellent recruiting tool and played a role in the arrival of many Libyans in Syria prior to 2014.

And who is Ansar al-Sharia in Libya? Via ***The Telegraph***:

Washington believes the group is responsible for the 2012 attack on the US consulate in Benghazi that killed the ambassador and three other Americans.

In November, the United Nations blacklisted Ansar al-Sharia Benghazi and its sister group, Ansar al-Sharia Derna, over links to Al-Qaeda and for running camps for the Islamist State group.

So there you have your soundbite. The Paris outrage: Made in Libya. Not Syria. And brought to us by the people who killed Christopher Stevens in Benghazi.

I am sure that Hillary Clinton is grateful to the French police for botching the raid to capture Abaaoud and pumping 5000 rounds into his apartment instead of capturing him; otherwise, he might have become a lively topic of interest and curiosity and the right wing could have cooked off the Benghazi! munitions through election day. For that matter, it seems unlikely that the governments of the West, or the media cheerleaders thirsting for a rousing good vs. evil narrative, are very interested in exploring the morally fraught issue of blow back from the spectacular Libyan disaster, either.

To sum up: the alleged and now reportedly deceased architect of the Paris attacks, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, did not fight "for IS." He fought "with" Katibat al-Battar al-Libi, a Libyan outfit whose presence in Syria predates that of ISIS. Even after Katibat al-Battar al-Libi decided to pledge allegiance to ISIS, it retained its independent identity. And it would appear unlikely that Abaaoud, as a European of Moroccan descent, would be a central figure in the brigade, whose personnel, funding, and mission seem to have largely emanated from Libya.

Despite his seemingly junior status in an autonomous militia, it is possible that Abaaoud was recruited by al-Baghdadi to commit the Paris outrage. But foreign fighters flock to Syria not only to accumulate general jihadi merit, but also to acquire skills they could apply in their own struggles. And Abaaoud may have gone to the Syrian war zone to hook up with an extremely capable Libyan outfit and acquire the experience and connections to fulfill his own ambitions for mayhem in Europe, and not necessarily to support the global or even local objectives of the IS caliphate. So it is by no means axiomatic that Abaaoud returned to Europe with the mission to execute a high-level ISIS strategy.

Instead, Abaaoud might have been an angry guy with the skills, resources, and inclination to commit mass murder on his own kick. The police were already after him big time after the Verviers raid in January (we are now told that Abaaoud was "on" or a "candidate for" a spot on the drone assassination assignment list, but I wonder if this is *post-hoc* ass-covering). So maybe he and his friends decided to pull the pin, and go out in a big way.

I doubt we'll ever get the full story. But "Paris: Made in Libya" is an honest hook.

Peter Lee runs the *China Matters* blog. He writes on the intersection of US policy with Asian and world affairs.

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**known_unknowns** · 12 days ago

again peter lee has written something that not only goes against the western media, but gave a more investigative journalism than what the major media outlets can report on. by saying the paris attacks were not done by the syrian terrorists pretending 2 b refugees, but by exisiting libyan trained terrorists that went back 2 france after the war there.

what i find interesting further is this quote from peter:

"I am sure that Hillary Clinton is grateful to the French police for botching the raid to capture Abaaoud and pumping 5000 rounds into his apartment instead of capturing him; otherwise, he might have become a lively topic of interest and curiosity and the right wing could have cooked off the Benghazi! munitions through election day."

in another words, isis and its factions grew out of the libya campaign, and that clinton had a strong hand at building it up!! that's something 2 think about...

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**That Other Guy** · 12 days ago

Google "Project Gutenberg", go to their website and download the LIWC Function Word Analysis toolkit (created by James W Pennebaker)

From using it, you will quickly discover that the Peter Lee who supposedly wrote this article is not the same Peter Lee whose articles appeared on Asia Times throughout 2014 and the early part of 2015

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**Andre** · 12 days ago

I completely agree. While IS may have taken over AQ's "inspirational" role in executing attacks in Western countries, the fact is that it is far easier for Brussels and Paris to blame Syrian refugees and launch air strikes "over there" rather than deal with "homegrown" terrorism.

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**cylde** · 12 days ago

There are no good muslims, but they can fake friendship as long as it is convenient. Turkey is a good example of a false friend.

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