

Islamists Hold Sway In Eastern Libyan City

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Militants' violent grip on area underscores post-Gaddafi challenges

DARNA, Libya — Operating from the shadows, armed Islamist extremists are terrorizing the eastern Libyan city of Darna, six weeks after the deadly attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi threw a spotlight on Libya's growing religious extremism.

A campaign of bombings and death threats aimed at Libyan government targets is being blamed on armed Islamist extremists, including the city's most powerful militia, the Abu Slim Martyrs Brigade, whose ideology residents say is akin to al-Qaeda's.

What is unfolding here may be the most extreme example of the confrontation underway across Libya, underscoring just how deeply the fundamentalists have sown their seeds in the security vacuum that has defined Libya since the fall of Moammar Gaddafi last September.

The extremists have continued to operate here despite the popular backlash that followed last month's attack in Benghazi, 156 miles to the west, and despite fears of possible retaliation by the United States, whose unmanned drone aircraft can now be heard humming overhead almost every day.

For now, the militants appear to have taken cover in urban homes and farms in the remote Green Mountains that surround the city. But officials say the local government remains powerless to stop them, even as the extremists push their ideology just as fervently as before.

"No one will stop anyone from doing anything," said Fathalla al-Awam, the head of the largely toothless local council, and militants are free to come and go from the city and surrounding areas as they please. "There's no police, no army and no militias. Nothing. It's an open city from east and west."

Some Libyans say the extremist views are held much more broadly than just among the Islamist militias themselves, a fact they said the United States has failed to understand in the wake of the Benghazi attack. Not all of the extremists in Darna or elsewhere in Libya belong to a group, they said. But those who share al-Qaeda's ideology are many, they said, and that creates ample opportunity for recruitment.

"It's a way of thinking," said Saad Belgassim, who used to work as a bureaucrat in Darna's now defunct court system. "They kidnap people like they do in Afghanistan. They delude young people and send them off to bomb themselves."

In some ways, the sway that Islamists hold here is not a surprise. Neglected, conservative and desperately poor under Gaddafi, Darna stood out for its fierce Islamist resistance to the old regime — and for sending more jihadists to Iraq during the U.S. occupation than any other place in Libya.

The latest bombing here came early Thursday morning, when an explosion ripped through a building on the city's eastern outskirts that local authorities had hoped to use to support a new security force. Often, the locals say, the target is a car belonging to an official or journalist who has dared to defy the militias. A newly appointed police chief was slain in broad daylight last March with a quick round of bullets to the back as he filled up his tank at the gas station.

Those who adhere to the militias' ideology said their goals are simple. They want the implementation of Islamic law, or sharia, and they want to see the United States pushed out of Muslim lands, said Tarik

Sharqi, a fundamentalist imam in Darna, who residents said maintains a close relationship with Ansar al-Sharia, but who would only concede that “everyone in Darna is connected.”

Locals considered the drones they now hear buzzing overhead “a form of occupation,” he said, and Libyans would wage “jihad” to force them out.

Until a month ago, the Abu Slim Martyrs Brigade occupied buildings and ran checkpoints around the city, operating alongside like-minded groups, including the local branch of Ansar al-Sharia, the prime suspects in the Benghazi attack.

“They were the police and they were the criminals at the same time,” said Hussein al-Misary, a local journalist. They pushed aggressively for Islamic law and threatened those who favored Tripoli’s vision of a central government and constitution. They even posted kill lists on anonymous jihadist Facebook pages, he said.

The first sightings of U.S. drone aircraft here were reported in July, in what American officials have said was an effort that preceded the Benghazi attack to gather intelligence on Libya’s extremist groups. Misary said it was those sightings that appear to have prompted militants from Ansar al-Sharia, headed by former Guantanamo inmate Abu Sufian bin Qumu, to disappear from his Darna beach house into the mountains, while members of the Abu Slim Martyrs Brigade did not retreat until late September, after the Benghazi attack and in apparent response to U.S. warnings of retaliation.

At first the disappearances seemed hopeful, local authorities said. As the Abu Slim Martyrs Brigade retreated, the elected local council laid claim to their sprawling main base, an old sports complex, aiming to make it a police headquarters.

Days later, a late-night explosion ripped through the base’s headquarters. Other explosions targeted the cars of a journalist and two local officials who had advocated loudly for the militias’ disbandment in the wake of the Benghazi attack. The elected authorities retreated.

“It looks like the militias are dissolved, but the reality is still the same,” said Awam of the local council.

Awam said the council tried repeatedly — before and since the militias’ disappearance — to establish a local police force.

But every man appointed to the top security position has buckled to death threats or car bombings that victims have linked to the militias.

The result has been a security void that locals said makes Darna the most precarious locale in Libya. Awam said his council has no way to confiscate the hoards of heavy weapons, including anti-aircraft guns, heat-seeking missiles and tons of explosives, that the groups amassed during Libya’s revolution. The only way he could imagine solving the extremist problem now would be to give them what they want.

“I think if the government agrees to work within Islamic law, that could lead to an agreement with those groups,” he said.

Maybe, he added, that would at least quell the violence.

In the lawless aftermath of Gaddafi’s fall, Darna was an inevitable hub for extremism, officials said. And on an afternoon shrouded by storm clouds, it’s easy to see why. Yellow, dilapidated buildings slumped

over sandstone cliffs toward a dark blue sea that no one swims in. There are few restaurants and no parks.

The city's population has dwindled in recent years as those who have found the opportunity to get out do so, officials said.

That includes some 200 young men who have traveled to Syria in recent months to join the fight there, according to the local council.

"It's the emptiness here — there is a lot of time to waste," said Ebtisam Stieta, a member of the General National Congress (GNC) from Darna. "Most people feel like their lives are restricted, so they think only in terms of the front lines, death, and jihad."

Over the past year, Stieta said she has lobbied the national authorities in Tripoli relentlessly to bring development opportunities to Darna to preempt the area's potential slide into a new Yemen or Afghanistan.

"I told the ministers in the meeting that Libya should deal with these extremists first. Why are we waiting for the world to react?" she said, recounting a speech that was televised. The only people who did react were the residents of her home town.

"I immediately got death threats," she said.

Belgassim, the former Darna bureaucrat, and others said they believed that Darna could still be saved. But awareness of the U.S. election, and President Obama's promise "to hunt down" the perpetrators of the Benghazi attack, loom large here.

Many said they feared that U.S. pressure to retaliate for the Benghazi attack could push an already precarious situation even further over the edge. Both Sharqi and local officials predicted that a drone strike would earn the militants more friends than foes, drawing the support of foreign jihadists to an easily accessible fight, and turning Libya's Green Mountains into a new Pakistan.

"If there are drone strikes, people will see it as Libyan sovereignty that's being threatened," Stieta said. "It might compel people to join these groups rather than go against them."

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