

# Facts Back Russia on Turkish Attack

Turkey claims its Nov. 24 shoot-down of a Russian warplane along the Syrian border was justified – and the Obama administration is publicly siding with its NATO ally – but a review of the evidence supports Russian accusations of an “ambush,” writes Gareth Porter for Middle East Eye.

By Gareth Porter

The United States and its NATO allies offered a ritual of NATO unity after Turkish officials presented their case that the shoot-down of a Russian jet occurred after two planes had penetrated Turkish airspace. The Turkish representative reportedly played a recording of a series warning the Turkish F-16 pilots had issued to the Russian jets without a Russian response, and U.S. and other NATO member states endorsed Turkey’s right to defend its airspace.

U.S. Defense Department spokesman Colonel Steve Warren supported the Turkish claim that 10 warnings had been issued over a period of five minutes. The Obama administration apparently expressed less concern about whether Russian planes had actually crossed into Turkish airspace. Col. Warren admitted that U.S. officials have still yet to establish where the Russian aircraft was located when a Turkish missile hit the plane.

Although the Obama administration is not about to admit it, the data already available supports the Russian assertion that the Turkish shoot-down was, as Russian President Vladimir Putin asserted, an “ambush” that had been carefully prepared in advance. The central Turkish claim that its F-16 pilots had warned the two Russian aircraft 10 times during a period of five minutes actually is the primary clue that Turkey was not telling the truth about the shoot-down.

The Russian Su-24 “Fencer” jet fighter, which is comparable to the U.S. F-111, is capable of a speed of 960 miles per hour at high altitude, but at low altitude its cruising speed is around 870 mph, or about 13 miles per minute. The navigator of the second plane confirmed after his rescue that the Su-24s were flying at cruising speed during the flight.

Close analysis of both the Turkish and Russian images of the radar path of the Russian jets indicates that the earliest point at which either of the Russian planes was on a path that might have been interpreted as taking it into Turkish airspace was roughly 16 miles from the Turkish border meaning that it was only a minute and 20 seconds away from the border.

Furthermore according to both versions of the flight path, five minutes before the shoot-down the Russian planes would have been flying eastward – away from

the Turkish border.

If the Turkish pilots actually began warning the Russian jets five minutes before the shoot-down, therefore, they were doing so long before the planes were even headed in the general direction of the small projection of the Turkish border in Northern Latakia province. In order to carry out the strike, in fact, the Turkish pilots would have had to be in the air already and prepared to strike as soon as they knew the Russian aircraft were airborne.

The evidence from the Turkish authorities themselves thus leaves little room for doubt that the decision to shoot down the Russian jet was made before the Russian jets even began their flight.

The motive for the strike was directly related to the Turkish role in supporting the anti-Assad forces in the vicinity of the border. In fact, the Erdogan government made no effort to hide its aim in the days before the strike. In a meeting with the Russian ambassador on Nov. 20, the foreign minister accused the Russians of “intensive bombing” of “civilian Turkmen villages” and said there might be “serious consequences” unless the Russians ended their operations immediately.

Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu was even more explicit, declaring that Turkish security forces “have been instructed to retaliate against any development that would threaten Turkey’s border security.” Davutoglu further said: “If there is an attack that would lead to an intense influx of refugees to Turkey, required measures would be taken both inside Syria and Turkey.”

The Turkish threat to retaliate not against Russian penetration of its airspace but in response to very broadly defined circumstances on the border came amid the latest in a series of battles between the Syrian government and religious fighters.

The area where the plane was shot down is populated by the Turkmen minority. They have been far less important than foreign fighters and other forces who have carried out a series of offensives in the area since mid-2013 aimed at threatening President Bashar al-Assad’s main Alawite redoubt on the coast in Latakia province.

Charles Lister, the British specialist who was visiting Latakia province frequently in 2013, noted in an August 2013 interview, “Latakia, right up to the very northern tip [i.e. in the Turkmen Mountain area], has been a stronghold for foreign fighter-based groups for almost a year now.” He also observed that, after Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh) had emerged in the north, al-Nusra Front and its allies in the area had “reached out” to ISIL and

that one of the groups fighting in Latakia had “become a front group” for ISIL.

In March 2014, the religious rebels launched a major offensive with heavy Turkish logistical support to capture the Armenian town of Kessab on the Mediterranean coast of Latakia very close to the Turkish border. An Istanbul newspaper, Bagcilar, quoted a member of the Turkish parliament’s foreign affairs committee as reporting testimony from villagers living near the border that thousands of fighters had streamed across five different border points in cars with Syrian plates to participate in the offensive.

During that offensive, moreover, a Syrian jet responding to the offensive against Kessab was shot down by the Turkish air force in a remarkable parallel to the downing of the Russian jet. Turkey claimed that the jet had violated its airspace but made no pretence about having given any prior warning. The purpose of trying to deter Syria from using its airpower in defense of the town was obvious.

Now the battle in Latakia province has shifted to the Bayirbucak area, where the Syrian air force and ground forces have been trying to cut the supply lines between villages controlled by Nusra Front and its allies and the Turkish border for several months. The key village in the Nusra Front area of control is Salma, which has been in jihadist hands ever since 2012. The intervention of the Russian Air Force in the battle has given a new advantage to the Syrian army.

The Turkish shoot-down was thus in essence an effort to dissuade the Russians from continuing their operations in the area against al-Nusra Front and its allies, using not one but two distinct pretexts: on one hand a very dubious charge of a Russian border penetration for NATO allies, and on the other, a charge of bombing Turkmen civilians for the Turkish domestic audience.

The Obama administration’s reluctance to address the specific issue of where the plane was shot down indicates that it is well aware of that fact. But the administration is far too committed to its policy of working with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to force regime change in Syria to reveal the truth about the incident.

Obama’s response to the shoot-down blandly blamed the problem on the Russian military being in part of Syria. “They are operating very close to a Turkish border,” he declared, and if the Russians would only focus solely on Daesh, “some of these conflicts or potentials for mistakes or escalation are less likely to occur.”

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*Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare.* [This article originally appeared at <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/real-turkeys-shoot-down-russian-jet-1615790737>]

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## How Gaddafi's Ouster Unleashed Terror

**Exclusive:** Hillary Clinton still sees the 2011 Libyan "regime change" as a feather in her cap as Secretary of State, but the violent ouster of Muammar Gaddafi turned Libya into a badlands for Islamic terrorists who have spread their killing sprees far and wide, just as Gaddafi warned, says Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

The bloody terrorist attacks in Paris had their genesis not only in the poor Muslim suburbs of France and Belgium, and on the battlefields of Syria, but also in NATO's operation to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The Libyan strongman gave the West fair warning at the time that his ouster would give an enormous boost to radical jihadists. Because no one in power listened, thousands have died in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Mali and now France.

Among the many extremist groups running wild in Libya today is the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh). Headquartered in the city of Sirte, the late Col. Gaddafi's hometown on the central Mediterranean coast, the ISIS colony now hosts as many as 3,000 foreign fighters who enforce their iron rule over a 150-mile stretch of the country's coast. ISIS also has a strong presence in northeastern Libya, around the towns of Derna and Benghazi.

Since Gaddafi's fall in 2011, Libya has exported thousands of its own extremists to support jihad in other countries. In Syria, one group of Libyan supporters of ISIS went by the name of Katibat al-Battar al Libi. One of its leaders was none other than Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the suspected organizer of the recent Paris attacks.

His connection to those Libyan fighters in Syria was first established back in January, before the killings in Paris, by Belgian researcher Pieter van Ostaeyen. On Jan. 15, Belgian police killed two members of the radical organization in the town of Verviers, where they were said to be planning a major terrorist attack.

“After the foiled attacks in Verviers in Belgium,” van Ostaeyen wrote, “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.”

Photos posted on van Ostaeyen’s blog show grinning, bearded Belgian fighters posed for group portraits in Syria, as if on holiday. He recently observed that many Belgian jihadists were attracted to Katibat al-Battar because they emigrated from eastern Morocco, where they speak a dialect similar to that in Libya.

Last year, Washington researcher Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi called the group “the Libyan division of the Islamic State of Iraq.” He added, “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.”

### **Spreading Violence**

A subsequent report by two members of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace commented on the role of Libyan jihadists who returned home from Syria to commit atrocities on behalf of ISIS, including car bombings, attacks on hotels and embassies, and a brutal slaughter of Egyptian Copts. The analysts traced much of the violence to veterans of Katibat al-Battar, who were active in Derna and Benghazi:

“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 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 . . . 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 . . . fighters in Derna. They then declared eastern Libya to be a province of the Islamic State.”

The estimated 800 Battar Brigade veterans in Derna proceeded to execute local judges, journalists, army officers and anyone else deemed un-Islamic. They sent suicide bombers to Tobruk, the temporary headquarters of Libya's national parliament, to Benghazi, and to the embassies of Egypt and United Arab Emirates in Tripoli.

*New Yorker* correspondent Jon Lee Anderson reported that "a rival militia loyal to Al Qaeda" wrested control of Derna from the Battar Brigade veterans this summer. "The victors are said to have marched the captured ISIS commander through the streets naked before executing him. ISIS lost Derna, but in the past few months they have taken Qaddafi's home town of Sirte and surrounding areas in Libya's 'Oil Crescent,' and have begun attacks on the outer defenses of the city of Misrata."

Back in March 2011, while battling foes of his regime, Col. Gaddafi warned that such mayhem could follow his defeat. He told a French newspaper, "I am surprised that nobody understands that this is a fight against terrorism." If his opponents prevailed, Gaddafi predicted, "There would be Islamic jihad in front of you in the Mediterranean." He was right.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy chose to ignore such warnings and, with British Prime Minister David Cameron, dragged a reluctant President Barack Obama into supporting NATO strikes against Gaddafi in the name of humanitarian motives.

But in blatant violation of the United Nations Security Council mandate approving the use of force only to protect civilians, Sarkozy, Cameron, and Obama admitted in an op-ed article on April 14, 2011, that their real agenda was to oust Gaddafi "for good" so that "a new generation of leaders" could take over.

### **Hillary Clinton's Boast**

NATO leaders were triumphant after opponents murdered Gaddafi on Oct. 20, 2011. In the infamous words of then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, echoing Julius Caesar, "We came, we saw, he died."

With the release of Hillary Clinton's emails, we now know that she had learned from an adviser that France was stoking the uprising to impose a "new government of Libya to favor French firms and national interests, particularly regarding the oil industry in Libya." France used humanitarian flights to shuttle executives from leading oil, construction and aerospace firms into the country to negotiate with the opposition so they could profit from the new order.

To this day, Clinton remains unapologetic about her strong advocacy of U.S. intervention. Yet Libya has become a lawless land fought over by 1,700 armed

groups and militias. At least a third of the country's population has been affected by the fighting and lacks adequate access to health services, according to the United Nations.

"Libya today, in spite of the expectations we had at the time of the revolution, it's much, much worse," one Mideast expert told PBS Frontline. "Criminality is skyrocketing. Insecurity is pervasive. There are no jobs. It's hard to get food and electricity. There's fighting, there's fear. I see very few bright spots."

Outside of Libya, the result of Western intervention was to spread jihadism and deadly weapons all over North Africa and the Middle East. Al Qaeda's North African affiliate obtained vast stores of rocket-propelled anti-tank grenades, heavy machine guns, explosives, and even shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles from Gaddafi's armories.

Bruce Hoffman, director of the Center for Security Studies at Georgetown University, said Islamist militias in the region became "armed almost to the extent of a small army" after the collapse of Libya.

In Mali, an affiliate of Al Qaeda used their new firepower to occupy the northern half of the country, impose strict Shariah law, and seize and destroy much of the historic city of Timbuktu. In November, Al Qaeda fighters stormed a luxury hotel in Mali's capital, killing more than two dozen captives before French and Malian troops dislodged the terrorists.

Elsewhere in North Africa, reported Jon Lee Anderson, "Gunmen who trained with ISIS in Libya were involved in the murder of twenty foreign tourists at a Tunis museum in March, and thirty-eight more tourists, most of them British, at a seaside resort in Tunisia in June."

And then there is Syria, where Libyans flocked to hone their fighting skills. In 2012 the Defense Intelligence Agency, which predicted the rise of ISIS in Syria, noted that after Gaddafi's downfall, jihadists shipped weapons from former Libyan military stockpiles to Syria to arm Salafist rebels.

Indeed, one of the main jobs of the CIA station in Benghazi, before the devastating Sept. 11, 2012 attack on the U.S. mission there, was to track those arms shipments. The group behind that attack, Ansar al-Sharia Benhazi, was blacklisted by the United Nations in 2014 for "links to Al-Qaeda and for running camps for the Islamist State group," according to the *Daily Telegraph*.

First Iraq, then Libya, now Syria: Western leaders, along with their allies in the Arab states and Israel, have created multiple monsters that will threaten our societies for years to come. By all means, let us condemn those terrorists' crimes against innocent civilians, wherever they live. But let us not forget our

leaders' complicity in helping to unleash them against us.

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## Ben Carson and the 'War on Christmas'

An absurd but popular complaint on America's Christian Right is that Christmas is under attack despite the nation's extraordinary month-long birthday party for Jesus. But, ironically, one Christian Right favorite, Ben Carson, may oppose this celebration of Christmas, as Nat Parry notes.

By Nat Parry

Ben Carson, the neurosurgeon turned Republican presidential contender, may have a skeleton in his closet that could disqualify him from leading the United States of America in the eyes of millions of his supporters.

No, it's not the fabrications of significant chunks of his life story that [he's told](#), nor his [opposition](#) to Muslims being president, nor even his [reprehensible views](#) on keeping Guantanamo open into perpetuity. No, it's something much more serious than that at least, more serious as far as the average Fox News-loving Republican voter is concerned.

As a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, there is a strong possibility that he does not support the month-long birthday party for Jesus known as Christmas.

What's that, you ask? How could a leading figure in the Republican Party one who was [pulling ahead](#) of frontrunner Donald Trump in support from the key demographic of Christian evangelicals possibly be an opponent of the so-called "sacred Christian holiday" of Christmas? Well, it turns out that the religious camp of Seventh-day Adventism to which he belongs not only insists on [observing the Sabbath](#) on Saturday, but also, perhaps more controversially, rejects the celebration of Christmas.

As [explained](#) on their website, "Seventh-day Adventists do not celebrate Christmas or other religious festivals throughout the calendar year as holy



feasts established by God.” As strict adherents to the teachings contained in the Bible, they correctly point out that the “historical reason for adapting December 25 as the birthday of Jesus has no biblical foundation, but is due to the change of year from darkness to light, which happens in the midst of the winter in the northern hemisphere.”

In fairness, although Adventists do not celebrate Christmas, they go to great pains in explaining that they don't oppose the Christmas holiday *per se*. In fact, numerous articles written by members of the Church offer rather thoughtful, nuanced and historically informed analysis on this controversial topic, emphasizing that while Adventists should not personally engage in this pagan tradition, the Christmas season is nevertheless a useful opportunity for adherents to the Church to “speak with other people about the gospel.”

But considering the lack of nuance or historical understanding on this topic among many Republican voters who are all too eager to pounce on any perceived slight to their Christmas celebration as evidence of religious persecution, it is not clear how the Adventists' anti-Christmas narrative will go over with the GOP base.

After all, entire websites are devoted to documenting an alleged liberal-secularist conspiracy to rob conservatives of their God-given right to say “Merry Christmas” and force their religious views on everyone else for the whole month of December every year.

Glenn Beck's TheBlaze, for example, has a “War on Christmas” page with horror stories of Nativity scenes being banned from public spaces, and Fox News' War on Christmas blog has led the charge this year against Starbucks' red and green holiday cups, which have been deemed insufficiently Christmassy by many right-wing Christmas warriors.

So, will we be seeing denunciations of Ben Carson and his Church in the conservative blogosphere any time soon?

There is a wealth of material for the self-appointed defenders of Christmas to choose from, such as the Adventist Biblical Research Institute's totally factual claim that “that Christians adopted and adapted a pagan feast,” designating Dec. 25 as Jesus's birthday and ensuring that Christmas would be forever “connected with the Roman cult of the Invincible Sun.”

According to this account, this was done partially because “God, in His providence, chose not to preserve for us a record of the day of Jesus' birth.” (The lax record-keeping of Roman officials in First Century Judea apparently had nothing to do with it.)

In a recent interview with The Associated Press, Carson expounded on his religious beliefs and responded in particular to Trump's efforts to paint him as part of an unconventional faith, i.e., not a true religious conservative deserving of evangelical support. During a rally last month in Florida, Trump noted that as a Presbyterian, his religious views are "middle of the road." He then added, "I mean, Seventh-day Adventist, I don't know about."

Unfortunately, Carson's views on celebrating Christmas did not come up in the AP interview, but he did address the issue of an end-of-the-world prophecy held by many Adventists. Ellen White, who together with husband James helped found the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1844, predicted that the government, with the help of Christians who observe the Sabbath on Sunday, will eventually persecute Seventh-day Adventists for their Saturday worship, leading somehow to the End of Times.

"I think there's a wide variety of interpretations of that," said Carson. "There's a lot of persecution of Christians going on already in other parts of world. And some people assume that's going to happen every place. I'm not sure that's an appropriate assumption. If you look at what's going on today with persecution of Christians, particularly in the Middle East, I believe that's really more what's being talked about."

Regarding the Adventists' perceived anti-Catholic prejudice, which White expressed in her Nineteenth Century writings, Carson rejected that claim. "I love Catholics. My best friend is Catholic. I have several honorary degrees from Catholic universities," he said.

One wonders, however, what he might think of the recent comments of the world's pre-eminent Catholic, Pope Francis. In a powerful sermon at the Casa Santa Maria, the Pope told churchgoers that, although the holiday season is nearly upon them, now is not a time for celebration.

"We are close to Christmas. There will be lights, there will be parties, bright trees, even Nativity scenes, all decked out, while the world continues to wage war," Pope Francis said. "It's all a charade. The world has not understood the way of peace. The whole world is at war."

**Nat Parry is the co-author of *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush.* [This story originally appeared at Essential Opinion, <https://essentialopinion.wordpress.com>.]**

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