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Lessons from Benghazi: Rethinking U.S. Diplomatic Security

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Understanding what was behind the September 11, 2012, terrorist attack on the U.S. facility in Benghazi and the tragic results is vital for preparing for future security threats to embassies, consulates, and diplomatic missions. The attack in Benghazi reveals a terrorist attack profile that the U.S. is likely to see again.

If the U.S. is to learn the lessons of this tragedy and prepare for the next 9/11, it should get unvarnished, complete, and accurate answers to four key questions regarding the security for the Benghazi consulate.

An Attractive Target. Based on publicly available information, the full nature of the linkage between the Benghazi attack and the broader al-Qaeda-inspired Islamist insurgency is still unclear. Nevertheless, what is abundantly clear is that al-Qaeda and its affiliates have demonstrated a

consistent pattern of behavior: Once they adopt a tactic, they do not abandon it. They study the results. They look to improve and innovate—and they come back and try it again.

Because of the global attention that the Benghazi attack has attracted, this tactic will obviously get renewed attention from al-Qaeda leaders. Al-Qaeda-affiliated sources have already called for additional attacks on U.S. embassies. Regardless of the motivation and organization behind Benghazi, the U.S. government should anticipate that al-Qaeda and its affiliates will aspire to more such attacks. Washington cannot start too soon in preparing to better counter such efforts.

Rethinking U.S. Diplomatic Security. Appropriately rethinking security at U.S. embassies, consulates, and other diplomatic facilities may require a new baseline. Here, a full and complete case study of the preparedness for and response to the Benghazi attack could be extremely helpful. Publicly available information provided by U.S. federal agencies and the Administration is completely inadequate to conduct an effective assessment and offer real insights into systemic issues regarding diplomatic security. Obtaining a full

appreciation of the lessons that can be learned from the Benghazi attack requires full and complete answers to four questions:

1. What counterterrorism and early warning measures were in place to proactively address security threats? To learn how to prevent attacks against U.S. overseas facilities in the future, it is necessary to know what counterterrorism efforts, if any, were undertaken to reduce the threat of an attack in the first place. According to an embassy report made by diplomatic security personnel, as reported in the *Los Angeles Times*, there were 230 “security incidents” at the Benghazi consulate between June 2011 and July 2012, including a bomb explosion on June 6, 2012. U.S. facilities in Libya were obviously operating under high-risk conditions. The most effective means to stop terrorist threats is to thwart them before they move to execution. What procedures were taken to identify and disrupt terrorist operations aimed at diplomatic personnel and facilities or provide early warning before an attack?

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2. What risk assessments were performed and what risk mitigation measures were adopted prior to the attack? Eastern Libya in particular has long been a haven for extremist activity. Since the fall of the Muammar Qadhafi regime, Libya's fledgling government has been unable to stem the influence of Islamists and extremist militias. The instability on the ground, therefore, created a significant risk to U.S. personnel. Risk assessments that evaluate threat, criticality, and vulnerability and then adopt the most prudent combination of risk-mitigation measures are a proven strategy for enhancing physical security. It is vital to understand how the State Department evaluated risk and how it elected to mitigate that risk.

3. What contingency planning was undertaken and exercised to respond to armed assaults against U.S. facilities in Benghazi? Early warning planning and risk assessment are

integral to countering threats against U.S. personnel and facilities, but they have their limits. Incomplete data and inaccurate judgment are challenges that could result in unforeseen consequences. Contingency planning that is flexible and adaptable is therefore crucial to ensure an adequate response to potential threats. In order to fully assess the response to the Benghazi attack, it is important to assess what contingency plans were in place, how developed they were, and whether they were exercised or implemented.

4. How is the interagency response to the incident organized and managed? When a crisis erupts that puts the lives of U.S. personnel as well as U.S. interests at risk, the whole of government should respond with alacrity with all of the resources that are reasonably available. A complete examination of the U.S. response, therefore, should address the command, control,

and coordination of efforts to organize and integrate inter-agency efforts after the threat in Benghazi became evident.

Answers Needed. After Benghazi, the Administration announced a number of efforts to get at the facts behind Benghazi and the state of U.S. security at overseas diplomatic facilities. These include a State Department Accountability Review Board and assessments by the State Department inspector general. For Congress and the Administration to adequately determine what can be learned from the tragedy in Benghazi, they will need full and complete answers to the four questions posed here.

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