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Benghazi Terrorist Attack: Select Committee Needed to Investigate *Morgan Lorraine Roach and Jessica Zuckerman*

Almost three months after the September 11 attack on the U.S. facility in Benghazi, there are still many unanswered questions about what led to the deaths of four Americans. Despite Congress's efforts to investigate the events surrounding the attack, little has been learned about how the United States can respond to similar attacks in the future.

It is therefore necessary for Congress to establish a select committee, preferably bicameral, to examine the attack and determine what should be done to improve U.S. diplomatic security.

A Coordinated Approach.

Following the attack, Congress undertook to investigate the events through committee hearings, briefings, and letters to Administration officials, but these efforts have proven to be disjointed and have

resulted in contrasting accounts, muddling the investigative process. Additionally, because the issues surrounding the attack involve the jurisdictions of multiple congressional committees (e.g., the Committee on Intelligence, the Committee on Foreign Affairs, the Committee on the Judiciary, the Committee on Armed Services, and the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform), the risk of stove-piping has emerged.

Obviously, the regular process for attaining the necessary answers has broken down. Therefore, Congress should pursue alternative strategies, such as the creation of a select committee, which has been shown to work previously.

A select committee would provide the opportunity for the relevant congressional committees to participate in a highly organized forum to investigate the attack and evaluate U.S. diplomatic security at U.S. embassies, consulates, and other facilities around the world. Additionally, a bicameral select committee would demonstrate that both houses of Congress are equally committed to fulfilling their constitutional duties to legislate and educate the American people on the circumstances of the attack.

Ask the Right Questions. To obtain a full appreciation of the lessons that can be learned from the Benghazi attack, the select committee should frame its investigation around finding complete answers to four questions:

- **What counterterrorism and early warning measures were in place to address security threats?** To learn how to prevent future attacks against U.S. overseas facilities, it is necessary to know what counterterrorism efforts, if any, were in place to reduce the threat of an attack in the first place. Open-source documents reveal that eastern Libya has long been a hotbed of instability and that U.S. facilities in Libya were operating under high-risk conditions. The select committee should determine what procedures were taken to identify and disrupt terrorist operations aimed at diplomatic personnel and facilities.
- **What risk assessments were performed and what risk-mitigation measures were adopted before the attack?** Since the fall of Muammar Qadhafi's regime, Libya's fledgling government has

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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been unable to stem the influence of extremist entities. The instability on the ground therefore created an apparent 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. Therefore, the select committee should examine how the State Department evaluates and mitigates the risk to its diplomatic facilities.

- **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 essential 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 required to ensure an adequate response to security threats. To fully assess the Administration's response to the Benghazi attack, the select committee would need to know the contingency plans in place, how developed they were, and to what extent they were exercised or implemented.

- **How is the interagency response to the incident organized and managed?** When a crisis puts the lives of U.S. personnel and U.S. interests at risk, the whole of government should respond with all reasonably available resources. The select committee's investigation should address the command, control, and coordination of efforts to organize and integrate interagency efforts after the threat in Benghazi became evident.

A Need for Answers. Support for a select committee has already been voiced in the House of

Representatives and the Senate. Representative Frank Wolf (R-VA) has drafted a resolution proposing the establishment of a select committee that would launch an investigation into the many facets of the attack, including what actions were taken by the Administration to improve security before the attack and how the Administration responded to the attack.

Obtaining complete answers to the aforementioned four questions would provide a basic framework for how Congress and the Administration can move forward in addressing diplomatic security.

—*Morgan Lorraine Roach and Jessica Zuckerman are Research Associates in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*