

BACKGROUND

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Lessons from Benghazi: Investigation Leaves Important Questions Unanswered

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Abstract

The September 11, 2012, attack on the Special Mission compound and annex in Benghazi, Libya, not only resulted in the tragic death of America's first Ambassador killed abroad since 1988, it served as a stark reminder of the myriad dangers facing the nation's diplomatic presence overseas. Following this deadly attack, an Accountability Review Board (ARB) was convened by the U.S. State Department with the task of investigating and reporting on the incident. The ARB's findings, along with other investigations, serve as an indictment of the State Department's unpreparedness before the Benghazi attack, and suggest a need for greater communication and transparency in preparing for, and anticipating, future dangers. Key questions remain and necessitate answers in order to better protect U.S. diplomatic facilities, and the people who serve in them, in the future.

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When armed terrorists stormed the United States Special Mission compound in Benghazi, Libya, on September 11, 2012, killing Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans, it was not the first such breach of a U.S. diplomatic installation. In fact, it was one of four such attacks that occurred over the course of the week in Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, and Libya.

This recent spate of violence underscored the often tenuous relationship that exists between evolving power structures in the Middle East, as exemplified by the Arab Spring and subsequent regime changes in Egypt and Libya, as well as the sometimes precarious security of America's diplomatic presence abroad. This phenomenon, however, is nothing new; nor is it relegated to the Middle East. Several significant acts of terror have occurred over the past 50 years, which have resulted in the deaths of American citizens deployed abroad.

Given this history of violence, questions arise about whether lessons should have been learned that could have led to more appropriate action prior to the Benghazi attack. Questions also arise about the scope and nature of the information received by the State Department

KEY POINTS

- Significant acts of terror have occurred over the past 50 years that have resulted in the deaths of Americans deployed abroad. Given this history, questions arise about whether lessons should have been learned that could have led to better preparation before the attack on the U.S. Special Mission in Benghazi.
- Despite Congress's investigation, key concerns remain unanswered. Fully understanding the September 11, 2012, terrorist attack on the U.S. facility in Benghazi is vital to preparing for future security threats to American embassies, consulates, and diplomatic missions.
- To ensure that the remaining concerns are addressed, Congress should establish a select committee to examine the details of the attack and determine how to improve U.S. diplomatic security.
- Congress and the Administration must also conduct frequent and extensive threat assessments for diplomatic facilities abroad, and recognize the nature and scope of the Islamist terrorist threat.

and White House before the onset of violence in Benghazi, and to what extent that information should have inspired a different course of action. Despite Congress's efforts to investigate the events surrounding the attack, these and other key concerns remain unanswered. Fully understanding what and who was behind the September 11, 2012, terrorist attack on the U.S. facility in Benghazi is vital to preparing for future security threats to American embassies, consulates, and diplomatic missions.

To ensure that the remaining questions are answered, Congress should establish a select committee, preferably bicameral, to examine the details of the attack and determine how to improve U.S. diplomatic security. At the same time, in order to address future diplomatic security, Congress and the Administration should:

- Recognize the true nature and scope of the Islamist terrorist threat,
- Conduct frequent and extensive threat assessments for diplomatic facilities abroad,
- Combat stovepiping in addressing diplomatic security and ensure a comprehensive government response, and
- Require that the investigations result in meaningful legislative and executive branch follow-up.

History of Violence Toward U.S. Diplomatic Facilities

During the second half of the 20th century, there were at least 40 major security breaches and attacks against U.S. diplomatic installations throughout the world.¹ In 1968, Viet Cong fighters stormed the U.S. embassy in Vietnam and engaged in a firefight with U.S. Marines. After nearly nine hours of fighting the embassy was

secured; however, the attack unnerved the United States, whose presence in the region had begun only two years earlier.²

More infamously, the Iranian Hostage Crisis commenced on November 4, 1979, setting off a diplomatic and national security stalemate that lasted for 444 days. In the wake of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, hundreds of students stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran, took over 50 Americans as hostages and effectively severed U.S. and Iranian diplomatic relations. The hostage crisis came to an end only on January 20, 1981, following the inauguration of President Ronald Reagan.³

More recently, in 1998, the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were bombed in near-simultaneous attacks that resulted in 223 deaths and over 4,000 injuries. The attacks were led by al-Qaeda, introducing the terror organization and its leader Osama bin Laden into the American lexicon.⁴

On the same day as the attack in Libya, September 11, 2012, an angry mob in Egypt climbed onto the U.S. embassy compound in Cairo and tore down the American flag, resulting in a confrontation with security personnel in which 13 people were injured.⁵ Less than two days later, hundreds of demonstrators also stormed the gates of the U.S. embassy in Yemen, smashing windows of the embassy building and burning cars. Fifteen people were injured before security personnel were able to contain the situation.⁶

As violence erupted in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, similar uprisings began to foment throughout the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. In Kuwait, nearly 200 demonstrators gathered outside the U.S. embassy chanting anti-American slogans.⁷ Protests formed around the U.S. diplomatic presence in Tunisia, Morocco, and Sudan; protestors in Bangladesh and Iran took to the streets in similar fashion. Even more recently, and unrelated to the pattern of violence last fall, a suicide bomber at the U.S. embassy in

1. U.S. Government Accountability Office, "State Department: Diplomatic Security's Recent Growth Warrants Strategic Review," GAO-10-156, November 2009, p. 11, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d10156.pdf> (accessed February 27, 2013).

2. Maya Shwayder, "US Embassy Attacks and Bombings: A Recent History," *International Business Times*, September 11, 2012, <http://www.ibtimes.com/us-embassy-attacks-and-bombings-recent-history-782665> (accessed February 22, 2013).

3. U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "A Short History of the Department of State: The Iranian Hostage Crisis," <http://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/iraniancrises> (accessed February 22, 2013).

4. U.S. Department of State, "Report of the Accountability Review Boards: Bombings of the US Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania on August 7, 1998," http://www.state.gov/www/regions/africa/board_overview.html (accessed February 22, 2013).

5. Mohammed Ghobari and Edmund Blair, "U.S. Embassies Attacked in Yemen, Egypt after Libya Envoy Killed," Reuters, September 13, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/13/us-protests-idUSBRE88C0J320120913> (accessed February 22, 2013).

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

Turkey left one dead and one wounded when he detonated his bomb at the security checkpoint.⁸

Unfortunately these incidents represent only a fraction of the nearly four dozen known and significant acts of violence and aggression that have been directed toward U.S. embassies, consulates, and consular personnel over the past 50 years.

Libya, Pre-Attack

In late 2010, popular uprisings across North Africa emerged in protest to the region's oppressive autocrats. By February 2011, the Arab Spring reached Libya where the opposition sought the removal of dictator Muammar Qadhafi, who had ruled for over 40 years. With support from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Gulf States, the opposition advanced from Benghazi toward the capital city, Tripoli. On October 20, 2011, rebels captured and killed Qadhafi outside his hometown of Siirte.

Since the regime fell, Libya has struggled to restore stability. It took nine months after Qadhafi's death for the opposition's political body, the National Transitional Council (NTC), to hold elections. Despite electing a national congress and a president, the government has failed to unify the country. Armed militias have rebuffed attempts by the government to integrate them with the Libyan military, and extremist groups are active throughout the country. In particular, the report by the Accountability Review Board, convened by the Department of State, details incidents demonstrating the dangerous circumstances in which American diplomats were operating in Benghazi and elsewhere in Libya. These include armed robberies, attacks on U.S. and international diplomatic personnel as well as on nongovernmental organizations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross.⁹

Furthermore, during the civil war, the regime's arms warehouses were bombed and looted and their contents proliferated throughout the region. Tanks, machine guns, mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades are just a few of

the thousands of weapons that authorities have reclaimed. While the United States, NATO allies, and Libyan authorities have had a degree of success in tracking down some munitions, large numbers are still missing. These include thousands of man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS), demonstrated to be capable of downing commercial jetliners.¹⁰

Fallout has not been limited to Libya. Immediately after Qadhafi's death, well-armed Tuareg fighters, once loyal to the regime, returned to their homeland in Niger and Mali. Those that returned to Mali joined the ranks of the separatist National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), which was already engaged in fighting the Malian army. This set off a chain of events that contributed to a military coup and the occupation of northern Mali by a coalition of Islamist terrorist groups.¹¹

IT IS EVIDENT THAT THERE WAS A CLEAR AND PRESENT SECURITY THREAT AGAINST U.S. INTERESTS IN BENGHAZI.

Ultimately, the inability of Libya's fledgling government to implement law and order has contributed to insecurity throughout the region. Considering the violent conditions on the ground, it is evident that there was a clear and present security threat against U.S. interests in Benghazi, although no specific threat of attack on the Special Mission had been cited by U.S. intelligence. Nevertheless, despite the lack of intelligence on September 11, 2012, this threat quickly became reality when armed terrorists descended on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi. In doing so, the attackers perpetrated an act of terror that claimed the life of the first American Ambassador murdered since 1988.

The Benghazi Attack

Early in the evening of September 11, 2012, Ambassador Christopher Stevens ended a meeting with the Turkish consul general and concluded his workday. Shortly thereafter, just before 9:45 p.m., a mob descended

8. Ivan Watson and Greg Botelho, "Guard Killed, Journalist Hurt in Suicide Bombing at U.S. Embassy in Turkey," CNN, February 2, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/02/01/world/europe/turkey-embassy-explosion> (accessed February 22, 2013).

9. U.S. Department of State, "Report on the Attacks in Benghazi by the Accountability Review Board," December 2012, p. 15, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/202446.pdf> (accessed February 22, 2013).

10. Morgan Lorraine Roach and Jessica Zuckerman, "MANPADS on the Loose: Countering Weapons Proliferation in North Africa and the Sahel," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 3763, November 5, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/11/manpads-countering-weapons-proliferation-in-north-africa-and-the-sahel>.

11. Morgan Lorraine Roach, "Fixing Mali: Stabilized Governance Should Be the Priority," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 3757, October 16, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/10/fixing-mali-stabilized-governance-should-be-the-priority>.

upon the Special Mission compound.¹² The consulate building, surrounded on three sides by orchards and a soccer field, was quickly overwhelmed.¹³

The compound was guarded by four unarmed members of the local guard group, the Blue Mountain Libya (BML); three armed members of the local militia, the February 17 Martyrs Brigade; and five U.S. diplomatic security (DS) officers. When the attack began, the February 17 Brigade members and the BML guards fled without raising the alarm. The DS officers, on the other hand, immediately raised the alarm, alerted the nearby CIA annex and the embassy in Tripoli, and went into action, trying to get the Ambassador and other personnel to safety.¹⁴

By 10 p.m. the compound building was engulfed in flames. One DS officer was with Ambassador Stevens and foreign service officer Sean Smith in the “safe area” within the compound. When the smoke became overwhelming, the DS officer attempted to lead them out of the building through a window, but was separated from them in the smoke and chaos. Later, the other DS officers and the annex security team located Smith’s body. All attempts to locate the Ambassador were unsuccessful. All other American personnel retreated to the nearby annex.¹⁵

At approximately 11:15 p.m. an unmanned aerial surveillance vehicle, diverted from another mission by the Department of Defense, reached the facility in Benghazi. After midnight, looters pulled the unresponsive body of Ambassador Stevens from the burning Special Mission building. The Ambassador’s body was brought to the nearby Benghazi Medical Center where he was attended to as an unidentified patient. He was declared dead at approximately 2:00 a.m.¹⁶

Around 5:00 a.m. intense fighting again resumed, now at the nearby CIA annex where diplomatic personnel had holed up. American security forces, joined by recently arrived personnel from the embassy in Tripoli, engaged the terrorists in a ferocious firefight that claimed the lives of DS officers Glen Doherty and Tyrone Woods, both former Navy SEALs.¹⁷

Fighting continued for several more hours before the first flight carrying American consular personnel left Benghazi between 7:00 a.m. and 7:30 a.m. Around 8:30 a.m., Ambassador Stevens’s body was brought from the hospital to the airport via ambulance. One of the DS officers that had been at the compound positively identified the body. By 10:00 a.m. the final flight carrying the last remaining Americans, including Ambassador Stevens’s body, left Benghazi, drawing the evening to its tragic conclusion.¹⁸

The Investigation

On September 20, 2012, less than 10 days after the deadly Benghazi attack, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton convened an Accountability Review Board (ARB) to investigate and report on the attack in Benghazi. Clinton’s authority to convene such an inquiry stemmed from the Omnibus Diplomatic Security and Antiterrorism Act of 1986.¹⁹

The omnibus bill, itself an outgrowth of a myriad of diplomatic security breaches and embassy attacks, stipulated that “[a] Board shall consist of five members, 4 appointed by the Secretary of State, 1 appointed by the Director of Central Intelligence.”²⁰ Such a board would be charged with responsibility for examining the “facts and circumstances surrounding the serious injury, loss of life, or significant destruction of property at or related to a United States Government mission abroad.”²¹

12. All times stated in the description of events are local times.

13. U.S. Department of State, “Report on the Attacks in Benghazi by the Accountability Review Board,” and Joseph I. Lieberman and Susan M. Collins, “Flashing Red: A Special Report on the Terrorist Attack at Benghazi,” Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate, December 30, 2012, http://www.collins.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/81d5e2d9-cc8d-45af-aa8b-b937c55c7208/Flashing%20Red-HSGAC%20Special%20Report%20final.pdf (accessed February 22, 2013).

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. Omnibus Diplomatic and Antiterrorism Act of 1986, 22 U.S.C. § 4831.

20. 22 U.S. Code § 4832 (a), <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/22/4832> (accessed February 22, 2013).

21. 22 U.S. Code § 4834 (a)(5), <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/USCODE-2010-title22/html/USCODE-2010-title22-chap58-subchapIII.htm> (accessed February 22, 2013).

Similarly, the Senate's Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee (HSGAC) produced a report analyzing the conditions and actions that precipitated the Benghazi attack on September 11. Nearly three months after both investigations were initiated, the ARB and HSGAC issued their public findings, on December 18, 2012, and December 31, 2012, respectively.²²

The ARB, chaired by former Ambassador Thomas Pickering and retired Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, as well as the HSGAC, issued a number of critical findings. These include:

Security Gaps. Per international standards, a host nation is generally recognized to be responsible for helping to maintain the security of other nations' diplomatic facilities within its borders. In Libya, however, the turmoil that followed the fall of the Qadhafi regime left the country without a strong central authority. More than a year later, Libya's National Transitional Council is still struggling to restore stability. According to the HSGAC report, the State Department failed to augment the compound with additional security staff, despite being fully aware of the Libyan government's inability to adequately provide security for the Mission in Benghazi. It was within the context of a recognizably deficient Libyan government support system that the United States relied heavily on local, indigenous security, namely the February 17 Brigade and Blue Mountain Libya.

The reliance of the State Department on such local security groups, however, remains unnerving given their lack of skill, obstinacy, and near-abdication of duties following a dispute over salaries and working conditions prior to the September 11, 2012, attacks. According to the ARB:

Although the February 17 militia had proven effective in responding to improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on the Special Mission in April and June 2012, there were some troubling indicators of its reliability in the months and weeks preceding the September attacks.... At the time of Ambassador Stevens' visit, February 17 militia members had stopped accompanying Special Mission vehicle movements in protest [over

salary and working hours]. The Blue Mountain Libya (BML) unarmed guards, whose primary responsibilities were to provide early warning and control access to the SMC, were also poorly skilled.²³

Indeed, the ARB indicated that it found little evidence that the February 17 Brigade and BML provided meaningful assistance in securing the facility in Benghazi during the attack.

THE STATE DEPARTMENT FAILED TO AUGMENT THE BENGHAZI COMPOUND WITH ADDITIONAL SECURITY STAFF, DESPITE BEING FULLY AWARE OF THE LIBYAN GOVERNMENT'S INABILITY TO ADEQUATELY PROVIDE SECURITY.

Also complicating security efforts in Benghazi was the fact that the Special Mission remained a temporary facility, the impact of which is twofold. First, personnel were stationed at the Special Mission for short periods of time. This made it difficult to develop consistent security protocols, and it also meant that no personnel were there long enough to become experienced in their roles. Second, there was a great deal of ambiguity surrounding security funding and resource decisions. Indeed, according to the HSGAC report, "Because the Benghazi facility was temporary, no security standards applied to it."²⁴ This included the provision of physical security measures and barriers at the facility.

Leadership Failures. Ultimately, the ARB found that responsibility for the gaps in security in Benghazi rested in part on "[s]ystemic failures and leadership and management deficiencies at senior levels within two bureaus of the State Department."²⁵ The lack of preparation and adequate staffing likely resulted from an inchoate sense of where ultimate authority rested in making final decisions related to security staffing needs. The ARB concluded that among Washington, Tripoli, and Benghazi, "[t]here appeared to be very real confusion over who, ultimately, was responsible and empowered to make decisions based on both policy and security considerations."²⁶

22. U.S. Department of State, "Report on the Attacks in Benghazi by the Accountability Review Board," and Lieberman and Collins, "Flashing Red: A Special Report on the Terrorist Attack at Benghazi."

23. U.S. Department of State, "Report on the Attacks in Benghazi by the Accountability Review Board," pp. 32-33.

24. Lieberman and Collins, "Flashing Red: A Special Report on the Terrorist Attack at Benghazi," p. 15.

25. U.S. Department of State, "Report on the Attacks in Benghazi by the Accountability Review Board," p. 4.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

At the same time, security decisions appear to have been stovepiped, rather than being viewed as a “shared responsibility” among the appropriate actors in Washington.²⁷ Greater cooperation appears to be needed between the intelligence community, the Department of State, and the Department of Defense to protect American diplomatic facilities in the future. Indeed, in Benghazi, Defense Department–support decisions may have been hindered by the lack of shared information and operational awareness between the Defense and State Departments. The Defense Department’s Africa Command (AFRICOM) was responsible for working with the State Department in developing security assessments and evacuation plans. However, it appears that the State Department did not know how long it would take the Defense Department to respond in the event of a crisis, nor did the Defense Department seem to know how many individuals were present at the Benghazi facility—which is important to know in the event of an evacuation.²⁸

Intelligence Deficiencies. Addressing the intelligence gaps that preceded the attack, the Accountability Review Board found a discontinuity in the understanding, and anticipation, of terrorist activity at or near the Special Mission compound in Benghazi. “Known gaps existed in the intelligence community’s understanding of extremist militias in Libya and the potential threat they posed to U.S. interests, although some threats were known to exist,” the ARB concluded.

Similarly, the HSGAC report concluded that the lack of specific intelligence warnings may have partially stemmed from the narrow focus of the intelligence community in Libya on al-Qaeda and its known affiliates: “[T]he activities of local terrorist and Islamist extremist groups in Libya may have received insufficient attention from the IC [intelligence community] prior to the attack, partially because some of the groups possessed ambiguous operational ties to core al-Qaeda and its primary affiliates.”²⁹ This finding seems particularly relevant given that the local extremist group that has claimed

responsibility for the attacks, Ansar al-Sharia Libya, is neither directly tied to al-Qaeda nor a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization.

THE ARB CONCLUDED THAT AMONGST WASHINGTON, TRIPOLI, AND BENGHAZI, “[T]HERE APPEARED TO BE VERY REAL CONFUSION OVER WHO, ULTIMATELY, WAS RESPONSIBLE AND EMPOWERED TO MAKE DECISIONS BASED ON BOTH POLICY AND SECURITY CONSIDERATIONS.”

Ultimately, both the ARB and HSGAC cautioned against an over-reliance on “warning intelligence” in preparation for the onset of violence at high-risk, high-threat diplomatic missions.³⁰ Instead, the State Department should increase its awareness of the wide array of other factors that could alert it to any rapid or ongoing deterioration of regions in which a mission is operating. Indeed, a wealth of information existed prior to the attack indicating that the security situation in Benghazi was deteriorating. This information could have been used by State Department officials to inform security needs at the Special Mission facility. Unfortunately, this reactionary mentality seems to be par for the course, as the Administration continues to broadly treat terrorism under a law enforcement paradigm that focuses on response-oriented policies and prosecuting terrorists. This approach takes the place of proactive efforts to enhance intelligence tools and thwart terrorist attacks long before the public is in danger.³¹

Secretary Clinton’s Testimony

On January 23, 2013, after the release of each report’s respective findings, Secretary Clinton testified before Congress.³² Her testimony offered few answers to the questions that remained. Clinton attempted to place the Benghazi attack within the historical context of violence

27. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Lieberman and Collins, “Flashing Red: A Special Report on the Terrorist Attack at Benghazi,” p. 8.

30. U.S. Department of State, “Report on the Attacks in Benghazi by the Accountability Review Board,” and Lieberman and Collins, “Flashing Red: A Special Report on the Terrorist Attack at Benghazi.”

31. *Ibid.*

32. Hearing, “Benghazi: The Attacks and the Lessons Learned,” U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 113th Congress, 1st Session, January 23, 2013, http://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/benghazi_the-attacks-and-the-lessons-learned (accessed February 22, 2013), and Hearing, “Terrorist Attack in Benghazi: The Secretary of State’s View,” Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, 113th Congress, 1st Session, January 23, 2013, <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/terrorist-attack-benghazi-secretary-state%E2%80%99s-view> (accessed February 22, 2013).

against diplomatic missions and seemed to convey a sense of incredulity at the public nature of Congress's inquiry. "This committee never had a public hearing about the 17 other ARBs because they're classified," Clinton stated.³³ Of the 19 ARBs convened since 1988, only two unclassified versions have been released.³⁴

The now former Secretary of State, while openly taking responsibility for the September 11, 2012, attack, downplayed the extent to which she was personally aware of the deteriorating security situation in Benghazi as well as the formal requests for additional security. Clinton testified that those security requests were handled by security professionals and did not reach her desk. Unfortunately, this equivocation does not indicate that Clinton's office fully acknowledged its own failures in understanding and reacting to the evolving threat situation in Benghazi.

In one of the most contentious moments of her testimony, Secretary Clinton reacted angrily to questions posed by Senator Ron Johnson (R-WI) concerning the nature and origins of the Benghazi attacks by declaring:

With all due respect, the fact is we had four dead Americans. Was it because of a protest or was it because of guys out for a walk one night, [who] decided to go kill some Americans? What difference at this point does it make? It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from ever happening again, Senator.³⁵

The differences, of course, between a coordinated terrorist attack, a planned protest, or an impromptu event spurred by "guys out for a walk" are manifold. Secretary Clinton's argument lacked resonance because the advent of a coordinated terrorist attack could have been prevented through improved intelligence-gathering mechanisms and concurrent increases in security, a scenario far less conceivable in the face of a spontaneous riot.

Unanswered Questions Remain

The ARB and HSGAC report articulated several areas where the State Department failed to properly anticipate and implement adequate security measures to protect diplomatic personnel in Libya. However, there remained glaring omissions within the reports. Many had hoped

that Secretary Clinton's testimony would shed greater light on the circumstances surrounding the Benghazi attack before its culmination and address many of these omissions. Yet, several key questions remain unanswered, including:

1. Which 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. More analysis and information is needed to determine which procedures were followed to identify and disrupt terrorist operations aimed at diplomatic personnel and facilities.

2. Which risk assessments were performed and which risk-mitigation measures were adopted before the attack?

Since the fall of Muammar Qadhafi's regime, Libya's fledgling government has 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 threats, criticality, and vulnerability are needed. Then, the most prudent combination of risk-mitigation measures can be adopted. Together, these methods are a proven strategy for enhancing physical security.

3. What kind of contingency planning was undertaken and exercised to respond to armed assaults against U.S. facilities in Benghazi?

Early-warning planning and risk assessments are essential to countering threats against U.S. personnel and facilities, but they have their limits. Incomplete data and inaccurate judgments are challenges that could result in unforeseen consequences. Contingency planning must be flexible and adaptable in order to ensure an adequate response to security threats. To fully assess the Administration's response to the Benghazi attack, any future investigating committee would need to know

33. Tom McCarthy, "Hillary Clinton Testifies Before House Committee on Benghazi-Live," *The Guardian*, January 23, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/23/clinton-testifies-congress-benghazi-live> (accessed February 22, 2013).

34. Ibid.

35. "GOP, Clinton Wrestle on Libya," UPI, January 23, 2013, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2013/01/23/GOP-Clinton-wrestle-on-Libya/UPI-20741358928000/ (accessed February 22, 2013).

which contingency plans were in place, how developed they were, and to what extent they were implemented.

4. How was 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. Future investigations should address the command, control, and coordination of efforts to organize and integrate interagency responses after a threat becomes evident.

Clinton's testimony aside, understanding the level of requests for additional security, or warnings of worsening conditions on the ground, that reached within the State Department, is crucial. This understanding naturally leads to questions regarding how deeply the State Department and White House have communicated on this issue.

In the immediate aftermath and weeks following the Benghazi attacks, the White House promoted a narrative centered on the notion that an impromptu demonstration against a crudely made YouTube video insulting the prophet Mohammed unraveled into the chaos and violence that engulfed the mission in Benghazi. Although the investigation is still ongoing, evidence suggests that officials at the State Department and White House believed within hours of the Benghazi incident that this was not the case. Instead, they believed it was an attack coordinated by al-Qaeda and the Libyan group Ansar al-Sharia.

Given the conflicting narrative produced by the Obama Administration, there are two possible explanations. One possibility is that officials within the White House were uninformed, meaning communication with the State Department was woefully lacking. The other is that individuals within the White House consciously and deliberately promoted a public explanation of the Benghazi attack that was at odds with reality.

Vulnerabilities Found by Government Investigators

Long before the Benghazi attack, in November 2009, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report detailing U.S. diplomatic security challenges. The

report found three specific areas of concern: (1) a greater number of missions in dangerous locations; (2) insufficient and inexperienced staffing and inadequate building security, and (3) a lack of strategic planning in diplomatic security.

According to the GAO report, maintaining missions in increasingly dangerous locations had stretched the State Department's ability to provide adequate security. The GAO found that the State Department was maintaining missions where it previously would have evacuated personnel or closed the post. Missions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other unstable nations required "unprecedented amounts of security resources."³⁶ For example, diplomatic security agents in Afghanistan and Iraq reported that safely transporting diplomatic officials was their greatest challenge due to the assets required. These include armored vehicles, contractors to maintain equipment in rough terrain, and in some cases an air wing for transportation, surveillance, and search and rescue operations.³⁷

THE GAO FOUND THAT THE STATE DEPARTMENT WAS MAINTAINING MISSIONS WHERE IT PREVIOUSLY WOULD HAVE EVACUATED PERSONNEL OR CLOSED THE POST.

The GAO also found serious challenges with security staffing and maintaining adequate building security. In 2008, around one-third of the State Department's domestic security offices operated with a vacancy rate of 25 percent or higher, with some offices operating at as low as 35 percent capacity.³⁸ When GAO staffers visited three posts overseas, for example, they found that the Regional Security Office in Abuja, Nigeria, had only one of four assigned security staff members while the office in New Delhi "had only two of its seven allocated special agents until fall of 2008."

While the State Department tried to hire more special agents, it takes three or more years to train these agents, even after the State Department condensed agent training. Unfortunately, the pressing need for agents ultimately led to 34 percent of security positions being "filled with officer below the positions grade," with such experience gaps threatening to compromise diplomatic security.³⁹ The GAO also found that "many buildings and

36. U.S. Government Accountability Office, "State Department: Diplomatic Security's Recent Growth Warrants Strategic Review," p. 23.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

their occupants may remain vulnerable to attack” due to a failure to meet embassy security standards.⁴⁰

Lastly, diplomatic security growth has been reactive, not strategic. While security will always be partially reactive, planning ahead is critical to ensure that staffing and resource priorities are met. The GAO found:

Past efforts to further plan Diplomatic Security resources have gone unheeded. Diplomatic Security’s bureau strategic plan for fiscal year 2006 (written in 2005) identified a need to (1) develop a workforce strategy to recruit and sustain a diverse and highly skilled security personnel base and (2) to establish a training float to address recurring staffing problems. As of September 2009, Diplomatic Security had not addressed either of those needs.⁴¹

Many of these gaps still remain today.

In a hearing on November 15, 2012, the GAO stated that it had found that the State Department still “needs to take action in order to strategically assess the competing demands on Diplomatic Security and the resulting mission implications.”⁴² Failure to remedy these concerns led to serious diplomatic security vulnerabilities at posts throughout the world, and will continue to do so unless they are addressed.

The Future of Diplomatic Security

The attack in Benghazi and the most recent attack in Turkey on February 1 represent only the latest incidents in which the security of U.S. diplomatic missions was breached. The tragic loss of life that resulted from these incidents should not serve simply as a reminder of the many dangers facing U.S. diplomatic personnel abroad. They should also act as a clarion call for improving the standards by which diplomatic security is assessed and implemented.

The U.S. State Department currently manages more than 200 posts throughout the world.⁴³ Most of these diplomatic installations require unremarkable security needs. However, many of the United States’ most sensitive diplomatic missions operate in tenuous security

environments. It is in these areas that one most often finds the need for enhanced security measures.

The findings from the ARB and HSGAC reports, and the fact that many of the most important questions failed to receive adequate scrutiny, should motivate action. Congress and the Administration should take the following steps to anticipate and mitigate the omnipresent threats facing the nation’s diplomatic facilities and personnel abroad:

- **Establish a Congressional Select Committee to find answers to remaining questions.** Questions still remain after the release of the ARB and HSGAC reports, along with the related committee hearings, briefings, and letters to Administration officials. These various investigations have not only failed to provide complete answers to some of the crucial questions on embassy security and the events of September 11, 2012, but have at times resulted in contrasting and confusing accounts. There is historical precedent for the formation of congressional select committees in the aftermath of similar security crises—such as the Senate’s Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities in response to the Watergate scandal, and the joint congressional committee that was established to investigate the Iran–Contra affair. Such a committee would not only help to provide answers to the remaining questions surrounding the attack, but would enable the relevant congressional committees to work together to ensure the future safety of U.S. diplomatic facilities abroad.
- **Recognize the true nature and scope of the Islamist terrorist threat.** Time and time again the Administration has failed to recognize the true threat posed by Islamist extremism. In the days immediately following the attack in Benghazi, the Administration failed to identify the assault as an act of terrorism, instead publicly subscribing to the belief that the attacks were born of a spontaneous riot. Not only does this show that the Administration may have failed to appropriately connect the dots following the attack, but also that it continues to fail to grasp the

40. Ibid., p. 33.

41. Ibid., p. 37.

42. U.S. Government Accountability Office, “State Department: Diplomatic Security Challenges,” GAO-13-191T, November 15, 2012, p. 7, <http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/650053.pdf> (accessed February 27, 2013).

43. Alex Tiersky and Susan B. Epstein, “Securing U.S. Diplomatic Facilities and Personnel Abroad: Background and Policy Issues,” Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, November 26, 2012, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42834.pdf> (accessed February 22, 2013).

ideological motivations of Islamist terrorists. So, too, it appears that the intelligence community may have failed to identify warnings of the attack due to its narrow focus largely on al-Qaeda and its affiliates, excluding groups not directly affiliated with al-Qaeda. In order to better protect U.S. interests in the future, both the Administration and the intelligence community must recognize that while Osama Bin Laden is dead, al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and other Islamist extremists continue to actively plot to harm the United States, its interests, and its citizens.

- **Conduct frequent and extensive threat assessments for diplomatic facilities.** Such assessments should be made for any and all potential dangers, both anticipated and unanticipated, that could confront any diplomatic mission—especially those operating in high-threat environments. These threat assessments should include input from numerous agencies, including the FBI, the CIA, the Defense Department, and the State Department itself. The assessments should also include regular briefings reaching the highest levels of both Congress and the White House. As the ARB report highlighted, simply relying on “warning intelligence” is not enough. Risk assessments that evaluate threats, criticality, and vulnerability, along with a frank assessment of mission priorities, risks, and costs, should be conducted on a regular basis and used to inform security decisions and resource allocations.
- **Combat stovepiping in addressing diplomatic security and ensure whole of government response.** As previously stated, 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. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta has testified that there was not enough time to get armed assets to Benghazi to aid in fending off the attack. Nevertheless, investigations have also indicated that coordination between the Defense and State Departments on matters of security were lacking. Similarly, while enough evidence existed to suggest that the security situation in Benghazi was deteriorating, it was not used to inform strategic decisions. This also suggests a serious failure in communication and coordination. As the ARB report asserted, security in Benghazi was not recognized as a “shared responsibility” across the whole of government. This must change. Greater effort is needed to combat such stovepiping in addressing diplomatic security and ensure

a government response to not only ensure that other nation’s diplomatic facilities are secure, but also to allow a swift response in the face of threats.

- **Assign a permanent Marine Expeditionary Unit to the Mediterranean.** As Libya and many other Northern African nations remain politically unstable, it is necessary for the U.S. to deploy more robust, mobile, and flexible security forces in the region. The U.S. Marine Corps should therefore permanently assign a Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) to the Mediterranean to provide this capability. An MEU consists of roughly 2,200 Marines, three Navy amphibious assault vessels, a rapidly deployable infantry battalion, and various aviation assets. Because an MEU operates from Navy vessels, it can deploy relatively large forces to a point of conflict rapidly, while not having the diplomatic concerns of establishing a temporary base on foreign soil. A permanent MEU presence in the Mediterranean will also enable a robust force to evacuate U.S. officials and citizens from an area of tumult quickly and with reduced risk of harm.
- **Require that the investigations result in meaningful legislative and executive branch follow-up.** Too often, security breakdowns are reported and recorded, and the recommendations are never implemented. Congress should enact legislation that requires the State Department to submit a follow-up report on Benghazi within a year specifically addressing the progress made on implementing the recommendations. It should also press the State Department to implement the recommendations issued by the GAO.

Ensuring that Lessons Are Learned

The tragedy that took place in Benghazi on September 11, 2012, shocked and saddened the United States. Both the State Department and the Senate tried to figure out what went wrong, in hopes of ensuring that such a tragedy would not happen again. The State Department’s Accountability Review Board and the Senate’s Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee released unclassified versions of their findings. While many important issues were addressed, there remain glaring omissions that still need to be addressed. In order to better protect U.S. diplomatic facilities, these questions must be answered and a more focused and effective holistic government approach created from the lessons demonstrated by this possibly avoidable disaster.

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