

Making the Case: What are the Real Lessons of Benghazi?

By Aki Peritz and Mieke Eoyang | Published: 05/30/14

TAKEAWAYS

It's time to move beyond the partisan finger-pointing over the September 11, 2012 attack in Benghazi, Libya. Policymakers should instead consider pragmatic solutions to reduce the chances of such an attack occurring in the future. Here are four ways for policymakers to make this case:

- It's time to stop the finger-pointing.
- We must protect our diplomats better.
- We must position rapid reaction teams better.
- We need to build better leadership at the State Department.

It's Time to Stop the Finger-Pointing

Many Republicans have claimed the White House led a post-attack "cover-up" ¹ and was involved in "lies of [the] highest magnitude."² These empty accusations include charges that the White House manipulated its Benghazi talking points directed to Congress and the public, that the White House ignored warnings of an imminent attack, and that it deliberately held back special operations forces which could have relieved besieged American personnel.

"There was no specific intelligence or indications of an imminent attack on that U.S. facility in Benghazi."

Despite nine (and counting) separate congressional hearings on the Benghazi attack, there is no evidence suggesting that the Administration deliberately misled Congress or the public.

- White House officials mostly served as interagency referees in a CIA/Department of State debate and did not shape the public message on Benghazi.⁴
- The Secretary of Defense, the Director of National Intelligence, and the Director of the National Counterterrorism Center all testified that there was no specific intelligence of an imminent attack on our Benghazi post.⁵

Congress has already held nine separate hearings into the Benghazi attack—none of which support Republican claims.

Furthermore, the State Department’s Accountability Review Board (ARB) found no individual ignored or violated his or her duties.

But what else should America do to stop the next Benghazi?

We Must Protect Our Diplomats Better

Instead of obsessing over who wrote what in a talking points memo, Congress should instead conduct oversight on the real dangers facing American diplomats overseas.

- Since 2001, attackers have struck 21 American diplomatic facilities in countries as varied as Greece, Pakistan, and Yemen [See Appendix]. This figure does not include attacks on our facilities in Iraq or Afghanistan, which number in the dozens.
- 17 diplomatic personnel have been killed in the line of duty since 2001.⁶

Diplomats face real dangers overseas, and we must protect them.

The Benghazi diplomatic post was overrun by dozens of heavily armed individuals, and the annex was struck several hours later by a mortar attack. We can do more to reinforce diplomatic facilities in order to withstand attack.

- The temporary Benghazi diplomatic post and its annex did not seem to follow the “Inman standards” mandating certain criteria in building government structures. These standards require, among other improvements, a 100-foot setback from the street, anti-climb walls, blast-proof construction, and electronic vehicle arrest barriers.⁷
- The State Department does not have minimum security standards for temporary facilities like the one in Benghazi; the ARB recommended the Department formulate such guidelines.⁸
- A more secure facility might have helped to repel the Benghazi attackers, but posts are not

fortresses designed to resist waves of enemies.

While a host country is supposed to protect diplomatic facilities, we still have to take precautions to protect our own.

Congress and the Administration should determine whether relying heavily upon local security services in high-threat areas is indeed appropriate. While the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations states a host country must protect diplomatic facilities, it seems that local forces guarding the Benghazi facility either did not come to work or fled once the shooting started.⁹

- The ARB insisted that the State Department be self-reliant when devising security in high-threat countries and not rely solely on locals to protect its facilities.
- Local security forces are usually unarmed; they protect American facilities by informing the State Department's Regional Security Officers—the Diplomatic Security Service (DSS) agents in the country—about rapidly developing situations.¹⁰ This process is not foolproof; it apparently broke down prior to the Benghazi attack.
- Congress must ensure DSS funding is not slashed, since this office protects those who conduct public diplomacy.

Congress must ensure Diplomatic Security funding is not slashed, since this office protects those who conduct public diplomacy.

We Must Position Rapid Reaction Teams Better

Instead of speculating about whether military forces could have gotten to Benghazi to save Ambassador Stevens and the other diplomatic personnel, Congress should focus on what could be done to help mitigate future security challenges to dangerous postings.

Quick reaction forces are not a blanket solution to security challenges.

Despite what one might see in the movies, Quick Reaction Forces (QRFs) cannot be everywhere immediately. But they can be pre-positioned in some of the most dangerous areas.

- General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, noted in his testimony that AFRICOM has most of its military assets in southern Europe, since there is only one U.S. base in Africa.¹¹
- Dempsey said that the current standard to deploy troops is “N + 6,” or 6 hours after notification plus travel time. While the military is trying to build “small, rapidly deployable forces” for the future,¹² even such units would have been unable to stop the unforeseen attack in Benghazi.
- We need to match the military force to the situation; deploying heavily armed aircraft into a

dense, urban, largely pro-American area at night—as was the case in Benghazi—would not have served the mission.

Secretary of State Kerry has recently suggested that the State Department needs more Marines at diplomatic posts, saying “their first responsibility is protecting our people.”¹² This would be a fundamental shift in what the Marines do at such facilities—their primary role now is to protect classified material and equipment¹³—and requires further debate.

We Need to Build Better Leadership at the State Department

The ARB criticized some in the State Department for a “lack of proactive leadership and management ability,” saying State must improve training for managers.¹⁴

- Following the Benghazi attack, four State Department officials were relieved of their duties,¹⁵ though the ARB determined no individuals actually ignored or violated their duties.
- The specific ways that the State Department’s managers failed are in the classified version of the ARB report.¹⁶ It is up to Congress and the Administration to push for reforms in the diplomatic bureaucracy.

The State Department must improve its leadership training for its senior managers and improve accountability and performance.

Ultimately, fostering a new generation of leaders requires a change in the culture of the State Department. That includes giving the senior team the flexibility to fire underperforming managers. As the ARB recommends, “unsatisfactory leadership performance by senior leaders” should lead to the State Department revising its regulations in its personnel management system.¹⁷

Conclusion

As the President noted in a May 2013 speech, even after hardening our facilities and changing our force posture, “some irreducible risks to our diplomats will remain.” Congress and the Administration must work together to find the appropriate balance between public diplomacy and personal security.

We must find the appropriate balance between public diplomacy and personal security for those who represent our nation in dangerous places.

Appendix

Attacks on American Diplomatic Facilities Since 2001 ¹⁸

Location	Date	U.S. Fatalities	Total Fatalities*	What Happened
Calcutta, India	1/22/02	0	5	Asif Raza Commandos and Harakat ul-Jihad-i-Islami (HuJI) attacked consular building with assault rifles.
Karachi, Pakistan	6/14/02	0	10	Al-Qanoon attacked consulate with car bomb.
Denpasar, Indonesia	10/12/02	0	0	Jemaah Islamiyah exploded excrement-packed bomb in front of consulate.
Karachi, Pakistan	2/28/03	0	2	Lone gunman fired on consular police post.
Tashkent, Uzbekistan	7/30/04	0	0	Suicide bomber from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan attacked embassy.
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia	12/7/04	0	9	An al Qaeda group directed grenades and gunfire at consulate.
Karachi, Pakistan	3/2/06	1	3	Suicide bomber exploded car bomb at consulate.
Damascus, Syria	9/12/06	0	1	Islamic militants unsuccessfully assaulted embassy.
Athens, Greece	1/12/07	0	0	A radical Greek leftist group fired an RPG at embassy.

Belgrade, Serbia	2/21/08	0	0	Rioters set fire to part of the embassy.
Sana'a, Yemen	3/18/08	0	1	Al Qaeda in Yemen (AQY) fired mortars at embassy.
Istanbul, Turkey	7/9/08	0	3	Islamic extremists with small arms assaulted consulate.
Sana'a, Yemen	9/17/08	0	10	AQY (soon to become al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)) directed a double suicide car bomb and automatic weapons fire at embassy.
Peshawar, Pakistan	4/5/10	0	8	Pakistani Taliban exploded 2 suicide car bombs at consulate.
Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina	10/28/11	0	0	Lone gunman fired on embassy with rifle.
Benghazi, Libya	9/11/12	4	4	Heavily armed Ansar al-Sharia attackers assaulted and overran a diplomatic post, then mortared an annex.
Cairo, Egypt	9/11/12	0	0	Rioters breached embassy walls.
Sana'a, Yemen	9/13/12	0	0	Rioters breached embassy walls.
Khartoum, Sudan	9/14/12	0	0	Rioters breached embassy walls.
Tunis, Tunisia	9/14/12	0	0	Rioters breached embassy walls and set fire to trees.

Ankara, Turkey	2/1/13	0	1	Leftist suicide bomber attacked embassy.
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This table does not include attacks on U.S. facilities in Iraq or Afghanistan.

** * Does not include the deaths of the attackers in the final fatality count.*

Endnotes

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