

The Why Behind the Benghazi Attack

The story behind the Benghazi attack was not the political cover-up that the Right has pushed, but rather how the U.S. consulate had grown into a CIA base, making it an inviting target for militants. The primary security failure was in not anticipating the danger, writes ex-CIA analyst Melvin A. Goodman.

By Melvin A. Goodman

Nearly two months ago, on the eleventh anniversary of 9/11, a group of militants attacked the American diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya, killing the U.S. ambassador to Libya and three other Americans.

The Romney campaign has accused the Obama administration with a cover-up of the details of the attack, and various pundits have sown great confusion over a tragic event that points to a failure of intelligence analysis and operational tradecraft at the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency.

The unwillingness of the White House's senior adviser on counter-terrorism, John Brennan, to play a public role in the aftermath of this tragedy left the Obama administration without an authoritative voice on the event.

It's now apparent that the U.S. consulate in Benghazi was no ordinary consulate; in fact, it probably was no consulate at all. The consulate's primary mission was to provide an intelligence platform that would allow the CIA to maintain an operational and analytical role in eastern Libya.

The region is home to myriad militant and terrorist organizations that threaten Western interests in North Africa and, more importantly, the creation of a stable state in Libya. In other words, the consulate was the diplomatic cover for an intelligence platform and whatever diplomatic functions took place in Benghazi also served as cover for an important CIA base. Both the State Department and the CIA share responsibility for seriously underestimating the security threat in Libya, particularly in Benghazi.

Any CIA component in the Middle East or North Africa is a likely target of the wrath of militant and terrorist organizations because of the Agency's key role in the global war on terror waged by the Bush administration and the increasingly widespread covert campaign of drone aircraft of the Obama administration.

U.S. programs that included the use of secret prisons, extraordinary renditions, and torture and abuse involved CIA collaboration with despotic Arab regimes, including Libya's Muammar Gaddafi. The U.S. campaign to overthrow Gaddafi didn't

clean the slate of these abuses; it merely opened up the opportunity for militants and Islamists to avenge U.S. actions over the past ten years.

At home, Americans are devoting far too much attention to whether a so-called proper level of security in Benghazi could have prevented the attack, instead of trying to learn the motives and anticipate the actions of these militant organizations.

The CIA failure to provide adequate security for its personnel stems from degradation in the operational tradecraft capabilities of the CIA since the so-called intelligence reforms that followed the 9/11 attacks. Nearly three years ago, nine CIA operatives and contractors were killed by a suicide bomber at their base in Khost in eastern Afghanistan in the deadliest attack on CIA personnel in decades.

Virtually every aspect of sound tradecraft was ignored in this episode as an unvetted Jordanian double agent was allowed to enter a sensitive CIA facility (instead of a CIA safe house), where he was met by the entire base leadership (a breach of longstanding tradecraft).

The base commander in Khost had insufficient training and experience for the posting and had been promoted regularly by the CIA's Directorate of Operations despite having been cited in a CIA internal review on 9/11, according to the *Washington Post*, for failing to warn the FBI about two al-Qaeda operatives who had entered the country in 2000.

No reprimands were assessed in the aftermath of the 2009 bombing, although high-level Agency officials had to approve the assignment of the base commander as well as the entry of the Jordanian double agent onto the Agency's most sensitive facility in eastern Afghanistan.

The security situation in Libya, particularly Benghazi, was obviously deteriorating; the consulate was a target of a bomb in June and the British consulate closed its doors in the summer, leaving the U.S. consulate as the last official foreign presence in the city.

Overall security for the consulate had been in the hands of a small British security firm that placed unarmed Libyans on the perimeter of the building complex. The CIA contributed to the problem with its reliance on Libyan militias and a new Libyan intelligence organization to maintain security for its personnel in Benghazi.

On the night of the attack, the CIA security team was slow to respond to the consulate's call for help, spending more than 20 minutes trying to garner additional support from militias and the Libyan intelligence service that never

responded.

Although nearly 30 Americans were airlifted out of Libya in less than ten hours, there is no indication that these individuals were debriefed in order to get a better understanding of the militia attacks. The lack of such essential information from those who had been under attack contributed to the confused assessments in the wake of the attacks.

There were other complications as well. Ambassador Christopher Stevens was an extremely successful and popular ambassador in Libya, but he had become too relaxed about security in a country that had become a war zone.

UN Ambassador Susan Rice was too quick to pronounce judgments on the Benghazi attack before the facts were known, which could be attributed to her interest in assuming a public role in order to buttress her case for becoming Secretary of State in a second Obama administration.

The public role belonged to Brennan, but he had previously mishandled duties in the wake of the attempt of a young Nigerian to board a commercial airliner with explosives in December 2009 as well as in the immediate aftermath of the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011.

The systemic failures surrounding the Nigerian bomber involved the entire intelligence community, including the CIA, the National Counter-Terrorism Center, and the National Security Agency. The Benghazi tragedy points to continued systemic failures in the intelligence community as well as within the State Department. A failure to conduct proper threat assessments will predictably lead to security failures.

The Benghazi failure is one more reminder of the unfortunate militarization of the intelligence community, particularly the CIA, in the wake of 9/11 that finds our major civilian intelligence service becoming a paramilitary center in support of the war-fighter.

Last year's appointment of Gen. David Petraeus as CIA director; the CIA's increased role in drone attacks in Southwest Asia, the Persian Gulf and the Horn of Africa; and the insufficient attention to providing strategic intelligence for the policy-maker have weakened the Agency's central missions.

The success of the Bush and Obama administrations in compromising the CIA's Office of the Inspector General has ensured that the Agency's flaws have gone uncorrected. The politicization of intelligence in the run-up to the Iraq War in 2003 was the worst intelligence scandal in the CIA's history, but there were no penalties for those who shared CIA Director George Tenet's willingness to make phony intelligence a "slam dunk."

If more attention is not given to the biblical inscription at the entrance to the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, that only “the truth will set you free,” the decline of the intelligence community will continue.

Melvin A. Goodman is a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy and the author of the forthcoming “National Insecurity: The Costs of American Militarism” (City Lights Publishing, January 2013).
