



Attack on U.S. Consulate Benghazi: U.S. Officials Killed

Product of the Research & Information Support Center (RISC)

The following report is based on open source reporting.

September 12, 2012

On September 11, the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi was attacked by armed militants, some wielding rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) and assault rifles, at approximately 3:50 p.m. The assault breached the consulate and resulted in the death of U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three U.S. officials. Several more personnel were reportedly wounded in the attack that left the consulate burned and ransacked.

Background

According to preliminary open source reporting, approximately 20 armed militants gathered outside the U.S. Consulate on September 11, possibly in protest to the anti-Islam film "Innocence of Muslims.". Following a series of warning shots from security guards attempting to disperse the crowds, American and Libyan security forces were overpowered. The armed mob was able to penetrate the consulate, resulting in the death of Ambassador Stevens, Information Management Officer Sean Smith, and two security personnel. Libyan doctors who treated Ambassador Stevens reported the cause of death was severe asphyxiation from smoke inhalation. Witness reports describe the use of RPGs, homemade bombs and grenades being thrown inside the consulate, sparking several fires.

Hours before the attack on the Benghazi consulate, demonstrators gathered outside the U.S. Embassy in Cairo to protest the controversial anti-Islam film the "Innocence of Muslims." Demonstrators scaled the walls of the Embassy, tore down and burnt an American flag, and attempted to raise an Islamic banner with the words, "There is no God but God, and Mohammad is his messenger."

The attacks on the U.S. Diplomatic missions come at a time when both Libya and Egypt are struggling to reconstitute their government and security services following the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi and Hosni Mubarak. The death of Ambassador Stevens marked the first death of a U.S. Ambassador overseas since 1979.

Analysis

The group or individuals responsible for the attack on the Benghazi consulate remains unknown. It is also unclear if the attack was premeditated or simply a demonstration that spun out of control. Following the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi and the ensuing civil war, Libya has been awash with small arms and light weapons. The use of such arms at the demonstration does not necessarily indicate a pre-meditated, coordinated attack. Online jihadi groups have claimed the attack was due to a statement released by al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri regarding the earlier death of another al-Qa'ida leader, Abu Yahya al-Libi. Others have suggested that the attack was pre-meditated to coincide with the 9/11 anniversary in the United States. Neither of those claims has been substantiated. Until more evidence comes out, OSAC is unable to conclude whether this was a pre-meditated, planned, and coordinated assault on the Consulate.

The contents of this (U) presentation in no way represent the policies, views, or attitudes of the United States Department of State, or the United States Government, except as otherwise noted (e.g., travel advisories, public statements). The presentation was compiled from various open sources and (U) embassy reporting. Please note that all OSAC products are for internal U.S. private sector security purposes only. Publishing or otherwise distributing OSAC-derived information in a manner inconsistent with this policy may result in the discontinuation of OSAC support.

In general, as the Libyan government and security forces have attempted to reconstitute themselves, a number of militias continue to impact the security environment, particularly in Benghazi. Some of the Libyan militias are anti-Western in nature and share similar ideologies with al-Qa'ida. As such, the September 11 attack in Benghazi is not necessarily indicative of a larger trend of violent protests across the Middle East.

There has been no substantiated claim of responsibility for the attacks, though media reports suggest members of Ansar al-Sharia participated in the attack. Ansar al-Sharia, or "Partisans of Islamic Law" in Arabic, is a hard-line Islamist group based in eastern Libya with ties to al-Qa'ida. Ansar al-Sharia opposed the recent Libyan elections, condemning them as illegitimate and un-Islamic. Ansar al-Sharia believes Libya should be governed by the Koran rather than a written constitution. It should be noted that Ansar al-Sharia is often used as a "catch-all" term to describe religious extremists in Libya.

Previous Attacks in Benghazi

- June 6: Militants threw an improvised explosive device (IED) at the perimeter of the U.S. consulate resulting in damage but no injuries.
- June 11: The motorcade of the British Ambassador to Libya attacked with an RPG, leaving two bodyguards wounded.
- June 18: Armed gunmen attacked the Tunisian consulate and burned the Tunisian flag in protest of an art exhibition in Tunisia.
- August 5: The International Committee of the Red Cross compound was attacked by individuals using RPGs, with no injuries reported.

Implications for the Private Sector

Demonstrations in response to the anti-Islam film may continue in the coming days, and may occur around U.S. diplomatic missions. Related demonstrations occurred on September 12 in Khartoum, Casablanca, Nouakchott, and Tunis. The potential remains for additional anti-Western or anti-U.S. protests throughout the region, and U.S. Embassies in [Tunis](#), [Cairo](#), [Khartoum](#), and [Algiers](#) have released Emergency Messages to U.S. citizens regarding the possibility of additional protests. U.S. Embassies in the region are advising citizens to remain aware of their surroundings and to avoid large gatherings and protests. On September 12, the Department of State ordered the departure of all non-emergency U.S. government personnel from Libya. The most recent [Travel Warning](#) for Libya advises citizens against travel to the country and recommends leaving the country via commercial air, out of an abundance of caution. Airports in Benghazi and Tripoli remain open.

There is no information to suggest that members of the U.S. private sector will be specifically targeted or harassed in relation to the ongoing protests. OSAC constituents in Benghazi report that the city is calm following yesterday's violence and that many of their staff remain under lockdown. Some constituents in Benghazi are planning to evacuate to Tripoli. Some OSAC constituents in Tripoli are planning on suspending inbound travel to Libya, restricting staff movements, and curtailing personnel travel outside of Tripoli. All constituents have reported general calm in Tripoli, with no indication of major unrest or significant anti-American protest activity.

Further Information

The contents of this (U) presentation in no way represent the policies, views, or attitudes of the United States Department of State, or the United States Government, except as otherwise noted (e.g., travel advisories, public statements). The presentation was compiled from various open sources and (U) embassy reporting. Please note that all OSAC products are for internal U.S. private sector security purposes only. Publishing or otherwise distributing OSAC-derived information in a manner inconsistent with this policy may result in the discontinuation of OSAC support.

OSAC will continue to monitor the situation and provide updates regarding the ongoing situation in Libya as needed. For additional OSAC reporting on Libya please see [Fatal Car Bomb Hits Tripoli](#), [Libyan Elections](#), [Libya Instability Continues](#), and [Progress Elusive in Libya](#). For further information and to participate in a discussion about the attack on the U.S. consulate please visit the [OSAC discussion board](#).

The contents of this (U) presentation in no way represent the policies, views, or attitudes of the United States Department of State, or the United States Government, except as otherwise noted (e.g., travel advisories, public statements). The presentation was compiled from various open sources and (U) embassy reporting. Please note that all OSAC products are for internal U.S. private sector security purposes only. Publishing or otherwise distributing OSAC-derived information in a manner inconsistent with this policy may result in the discontinuation of OSAC support.