

NOV  
2012

# Diplomacy Meets the Fog of War: The Benghazi Attack, September 11, 2012



[TRADOC G-2 Intelligence Support Activity  
\(TRISA\)](#)

Complex Operational Environment and  
Threat Integration Directorate (CTID)





# OEA Team Threat Report



## Purpose

- To inform the Army training community of the circumstances surrounding the attack on the U.S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya, on 11 September 2012.
- To provide information on the connection between militants involved in the attack and threat actors who are attempting to influence the course of events in Libya.
- To explain the how the Benghazi attack serves as an example of tactics, techniques, and procedures threat actors can employ to compensate for power imbalances that exist between themselves and technologically superior adversaries in North Africa.

## Executive Summary

- On the night of 11 September 2012, militants attacked the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya using a combination of small arms, heavy weapons, and lethal combustible materials. The U.S. Ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, and three other Americans died as a result of the attack.
- Accounts vary regarding the adequacy of measures taken by the Department of State, the CIA, and other agencies to prevent this type of incident. The loss of American life speaks for itself as an indicator that systems then in place failed to provide diplomats serving in Libya a level of security sufficient to guarantee their personal safety.
- The core issue is whether the tragedy was a fluke that only the advantage of hindsight makes visible, or a contingency that reasonably should have been anticipated and prevented by persons in high positions of public responsibility.
- Although it was first believed that the American deaths resulted from spontaneous mob violence inspired by an anti-Muslim video that circulated on the Internet, follow-up intelligence revealed that the attack was a planned terrorist act carried out by a militia connected to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Qaeda's franchise in North Africa.



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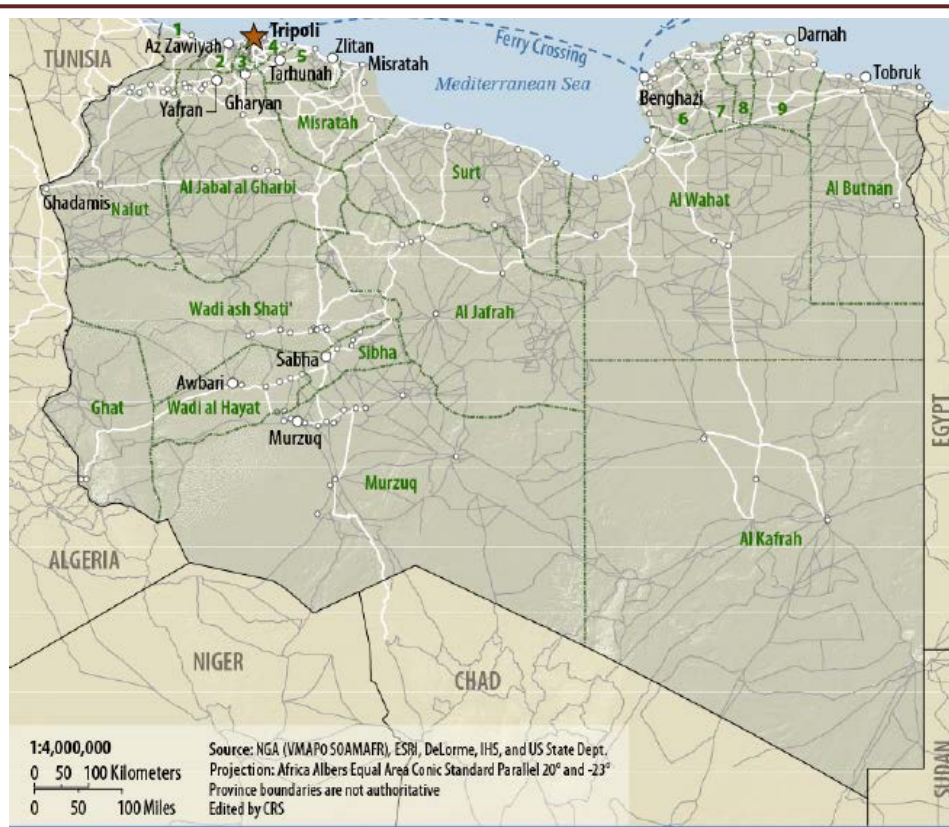
- Evolving State Department explanations of the attack's causes generated a political backlash that became an issue in the 2012 U.S. presidential election.
- A House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, a State Department Benghazi Accountability Review Board (ARB), and internal audits scheduled by the Department of State Inspector General are delving into the facts surrounding the Benghazi attack. The outcome of these inquiries will probably result in policy changes intended to improve arrangements for protecting U.S. diplomats overseas.
- An analysis of facts that have surfaced so far relative to the Benghazi attack should provide insights useful to trainers preparing scenarios anticipating deployments to complex operational environments (OEs).

*Cover photo: Truck with Ansar al Sharia markings parked in front of Burning U.S. consulate in Benghazi. [Wikipedia](#), 2012.*



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## Map



Land area: 1.76 million sq. km. (slightly larger than Alaska)  
 Population: 6.7 million, including 166,510 non-nationals (July 2012)  
 Major population centers: Tripoli (capital), ~1.7 million; Benghazi, ~1 million  
 GDP (PPP; growth rate): \$97.43 billion (2010), \$37.97 billion (2011 est.); 2.5% (2010 est.)  
 GDP per capita: \$14,100 (2010)  
 Budget (spending): \$54 billion (2012)  
 Literacy: 82.6%  
 Oil and natural gas reserves: 46.42 billion barrels; 9.89 billion cubic meters  
 Oil production: 1.5 million barrels per day (July 2012)  
 Source: CIA World Factbook, July 2012.

**Boundaries**  
 — International    - - - - Provinces

**Select Coastal Provinces**  
 1 An Nuqat al Khams    6 Benghazi  
 2 Az Zawiyah    7 Al Maraj  
 3 Al Jafarah    8 Al Jabal Al Akhdar  
 4 Tarabulus    9 Darnah  
 5 Al Marqab

★ Capital    ○ Major cities  
 — Primary roads    — Minor roads  
 — limited access

Christopher M. Blanchard, "[Libya: Transition and U.S. Policy](#)," Congressional Research Service Report, October 18, 2012.



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## Introduction

Christopher Stevens, a seasoned professional diplomat, was the Obama Administration's senior official representative to work with the Libyan revolutionaries during the "Arab Spring." A Foreign Service officer who had spent most of his career in the Middle East, Stevens formerly served as Deputy Ambassador to the regime of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi. When Stevens arrived in Benghazi in April 2011, the mood among locals could be described as pro-Western, since the Libyan rebels looked favorably on the NATO intervention that was then taking place and which accelerated the process that ended with Qaddafi's downfall. A year later, in the spring of 2012, Stevens became the first post-Qaddafi ambassador to Libya.

Although the ambassadorial office was in the country's capital of Tripoli, Stevens made periodic visits to a diplomatic mission in Benghazi that was informally called "the consulate." Security for Americans serving in Libya soon surfaced as a major concern. Former government-sponsored land redistribution programs that dated to the late 1970s fomented widespread discontent that lingered in the wake of Qaddafi's downfall. Grudges between current occupants of land and ex-property owners found expression in local militias powerful enough to defy government authority. Thanks to the recent prolonged period of revolution, the populace at large was extremely well-armed. Organizations sympathetic to al-Qaeda were known to have infiltrated some of these militias.

Faced with periodic lapses in Libyan government authority that resulted in occasional periods of near anarchy, American diplomats in Libya, to include Benghazi, came to rely heavily on contractors to augment security arrangements. One such security contractor was Blue Mountain, a British company that employed local nationals to protect the diplomatic mission in Benghazi. In the months leading up to the 11 September attack, members of the intelligence community on the ground in Benghazi typically met twice a week in the consulate compound to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of its security configuration. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) also occupied a compound roughly a half-mile from the Benghazi consulate, and maintained a small quick reaction force (QRF) that could be put in play on an as-needed basis to augment contracted indigenous security personnel.



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## The Run-Up to the Attack

- In early April 2012, a convoy carrying Ian Martin, the United Nations special envoy for Libya, came under attack in Benghazi.
- Shortly after the attack on Martin's convoy, a four-man contingent of U.S. Special Forces (SF) Soldiers spent several weeks in Benghazi. During this period they evaluated measures then in place to protect members of the diplomatic mission assigned there. The Special Forces personnel were part of a larger element that Africa Command (AFRICOM) had previously dispatched to Tripoli to provide security for the American Embassy.
- The SF security assessment determined that the Benghazi environment posed greater dangers to American staffers than for embassy personnel in Tripoli. Accordingly, the American Mission increased the number of sandbagged defensive positions and shored up other security shortfalls within its compound. Libyan security contractors also received additional training after the SF assessment.
- On 5 June 2012, the day after the U.S. announced the death of Abu Yahya al-Libi, a key al-Qaeda leader in Pakistan, an unknown assailant threw a homemade explosive device onto the U.S. Mission compound in Benghazi. The incident produced no casualties.
- The issue of how responsive the State Department's administrative chain was to requests for additional security requested by American diplomats in Libya between early June and 11 September is a matter currently under investigation by the CIA, the FBI, the Department of State, and Congress.
- On 9 September 2012 Al Nas, an Egyptian television station, aired a two-minute excerpt from an anti-Muslim film titled "Innocence of Muslims." Although originally produced in the United States in July, by the first week of September video clips dubbed in Arabic appeared on the Internet. These viewings sparked demonstrations throughout the Arab world.



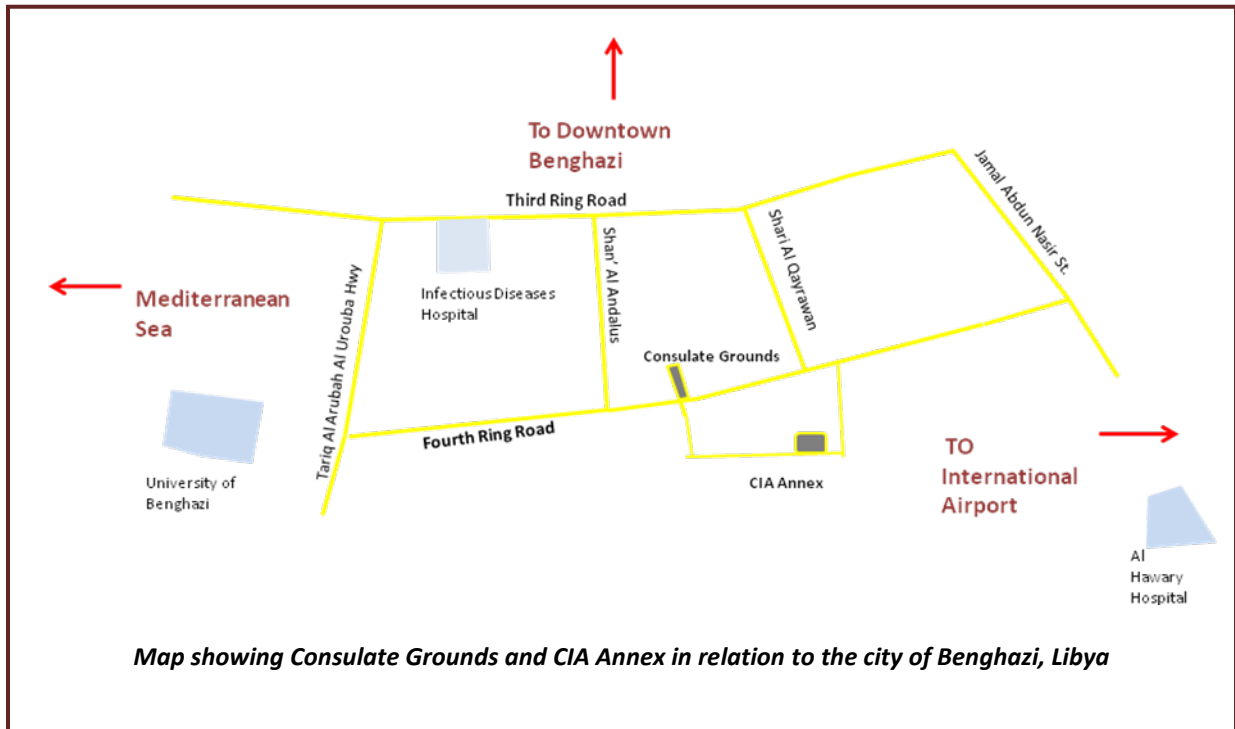
*View of Consulate Compound showing sandbagged defensive position, [House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, 2012](#)*



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## The Events of 10-11 September 2012



- On 10 September U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stephens traveled from Tripoli to Benghazi to attend a series of meetings. Ambassador Stevens spent the night of 10-11 September on the American Mission compound in Benghazi.
- At about 0645 local time on 11 September, members of the consular staff noticed a policeman in the upper story of a nearby building photographing the interior of the American Mission.
- Throughout the day on 11 September, Ambassador Stephens held meetings inside the Mission's walls. His final meeting, with a Turkish diplomat, concluded that evening around 2030. To that point, the area surrounding the American compound had remained relatively quiet.



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- About an hour later, explosions, gunfire, and a general commotion erupted outside the main gate. At 2140 a CIA safe-house located about a half-mile away received notification that the consulate was under attack.
- As CIA personnel grabbed weapons and organized themselves into a rescue team, a barracks occupied by Libyan militia contractors located near the compound's main gate was set ablaze. Local security at the consulate that night included three guards from the Libyan pro-government February 17 Brigade, and five Libyan contractors employed by Blue Mountain, a British security company.
- 2130-2200, 11 September: While the QRF formed inside the CIA Annex, three Americans—Ambassador Stevens, computer specialist Sean Smith, and a CIA agent— became trapped in a safe room inside one of the consulate's two primary residences. Meanwhile militants broke into the building. Although unable to enter the safe room, they set numerous fires by pouring cans of diesel fuel throughout the residence.
- 2130-2200, 11 September (cont'd): Diesel smoke and toxic fumes from burning furniture filled the safe room where Ambassador Stevens and the other two Americans barricaded themselves. Unable to breathe, they relocated to an interior bathroom and opened a window, but still could not get enough air. At that point they decided to make a run for it to another building, with the CIA agent in the lead carrying an M4 rifle and sidearm. As he exited, the agent immediately came under small arms and RPG fire. Forced to re-enter the building he had just exited, the agent attempted numerous times to locate Ambassador Stevens and Mr. Smith, but was unable to find them. Finally climbing a ladder to the roof, he collapsed from smoke inhalation after radioing other agents to update them on the situation.
- By 2200 four other agents located elsewhere in the compound were able to unite and use a vehicle to get to Stevens' building. There they discovered their collapsed comrade on the roof, as well as the body of Mr. Smith, who apparently died of smoke inhalation. However, they could find no trace of Ambassador Stevens.



*Damaged wall at consulate compound, [House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, 2012](#)*





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- At approximately 2210, while crossing an intersection a few blocks away from the consulate, the six-man QRF en route from the CIA Annex encountered a friendly militia element equipped with .50-caliber machine guns. The QRF was unsuccessful in its attempt to acquire these heavy weapons from the militia. Three militia men, however, did agree to augment the QRF. At that point the QRF consisted of 10 personnel, including six security contractors from Global Resource Solutions, Inc., a CIA translator, and the three Libyan militia members. Individual friendly militia men continued to join the QRF as it made its way to the consulate.



*Consular vehicle damaged during 11 September attack, [House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, 2012](#)*

- At about 2240 the QRF, accompanied by about 60 Libyan militia, arrived from the CIA Annex. Individual members of the rescue team took turns making several unsuccessful attempts to locate Ambassador Stevens. When their hasty perimeter began to give way, still under fire, they returned to their point of origin, the CIA Annex.
- At 2311 an unarmed Predator drone, diverted from a mission at Darnah, arrived overhead and began providing intelligence information to American observers in Tripoli and Washington.
- Shortly before midnight, CIA officers who remained at their annex a half-mile away came under sporadic small arms and RPG attacks that lasted for about an hour. When the attacks tapered off around 0100 on 12 September, some of the survivors wrongly concluded that the incident was over.
- At about 0115 12 September, a second (seven-man) relief force flown in from Tripoli arrived at the Benghazi airport. They became entangled in negotiations with local Libyan authorities that lasted until about 0430. While at the airport they abandoned the idea of going to the Benghazi hospital where they believed Ambassador Stevens' body had been taken, after learning that the building was surrounded by Ansar al-Sharia, an al-Qaeda-linked militia.
- By 0200 on 12 September, American officials in Tripoli and Washington, aware that Ambassador Stevens was unaccounted for, waited for further updates. At about 0400, Mustafa el-Sagizli, a Libyan transitional government official who also serves as a member of the February 17 Brigade, learned that a local hospital was holding the

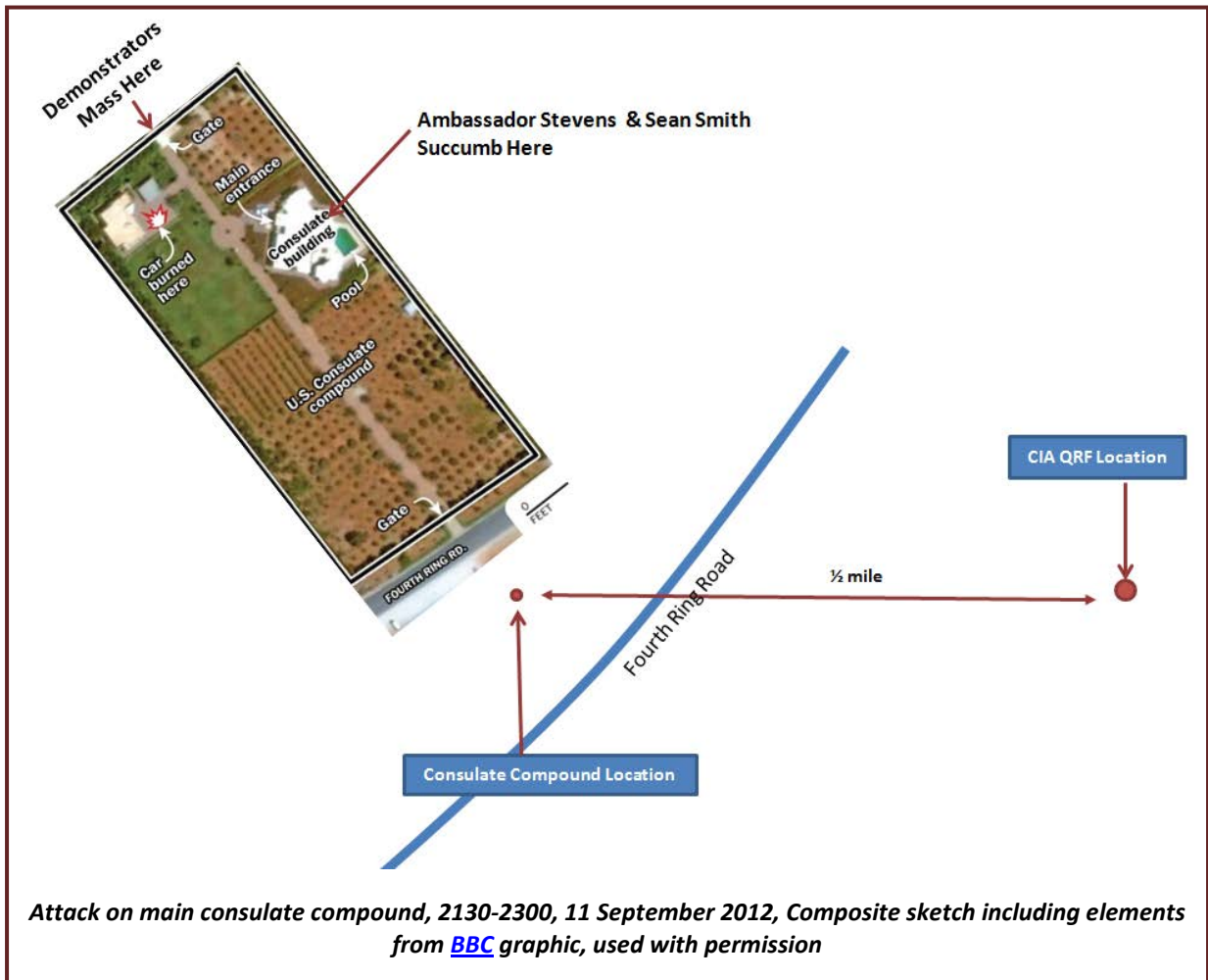


# OEA Team Threat Report



remains of a deceased American. Mr. Sagzli went to the hospital, identified Ambassador Stevens' body, and arranged for its transportation to the Benghazi airport.

- The security team from Tripoli arrived at the CIA Annex at around 0500, 12 September. After dismounting one of the commandeered vehicles, Glen Doherty, a GRS contractor, joined Tyrone Woods on the roof of the annex building, where they both took up firing positions.



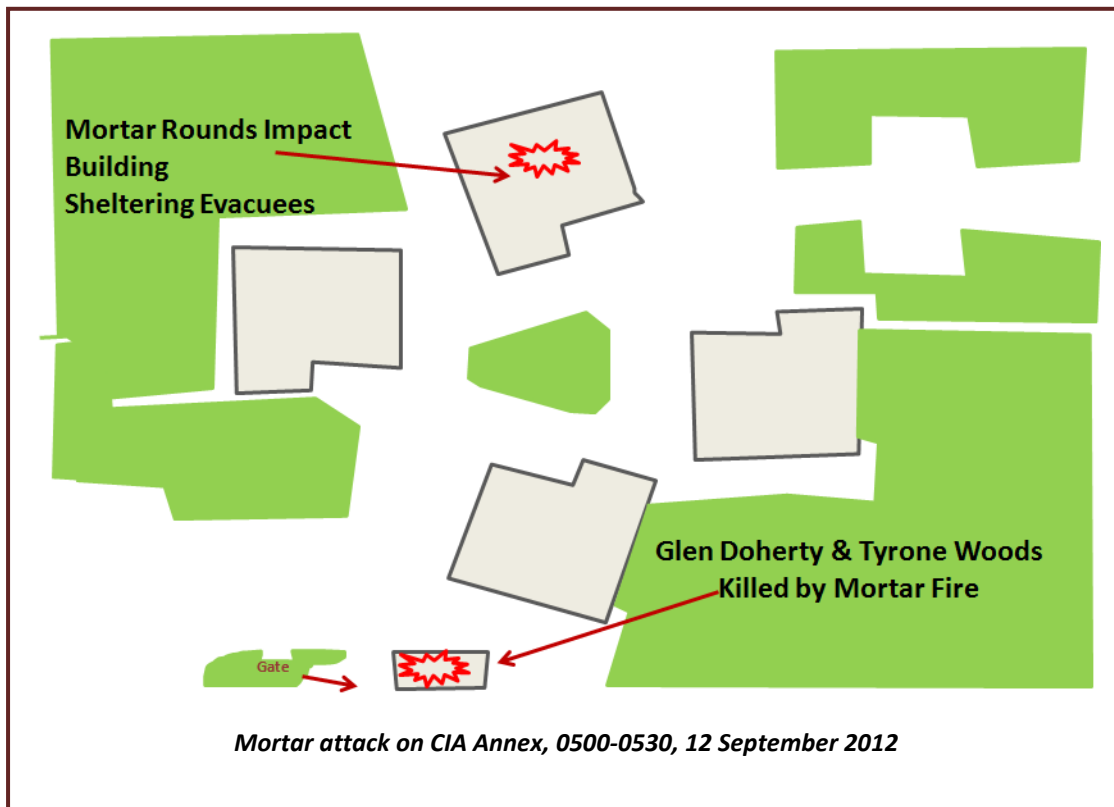
- At 0515 a second major assault began—primarily with mortars—that lasted only for about eleven minutes. A total of five rounds landed. The first two missed their mark, but the next three hit the roof where Doherty and Woods were located, killing both of them. Immediately after the mortar attack, survivors decided to evacuate all remaining American personnel from Benghazi.



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- At 0600 on Wednesday, 12 September, a 50-vehicle convoy assembled by the Libyan military intelligence service arrived on the scene to escort the survivors to the Benghazi airport.
- Because the number of evacuees exceeded the passenger capacity of the aircraft, the evacuation occurred in two increments. An initial group of 18 survivors, including two wounded, left at about 0700. A second group of 12, plus the remains of Ambassador Stevens and the three other deceased Americans, left for Tripoli at about 1000. From Tripoli the bodies of the fallen Americans were flown to Andrews Air Force Base near Washington, D.C.



## Aftermath and Reaction



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- On 12 September 2012, President Obama made an address in the White House Rose Garden, in which the word “terror” was used, but mainly stressed that the U.S. would not rest until “justice is done for this terrible act.”
- The following Sunday, 16 September, the American Ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, appeared on a number of talk shows deprecating the incident, but characterized it mainly as a mob action while downplaying indications that it may have resulted from a planned attack.
- On 18 September, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney essentially echoed Ambassador Rice’s remarks, but also indicated that the incident was still under investigation. The same evening, President Obama, in an appearance on David Letterman’s late-night talk show, said that the militants had used the anti-Muslim video as a pretext for carrying out terrorist attacks on American diplomats, including the mission in Benghazi.
- On 20 September, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced the formation of an independent accountability review board (ARB) to investigate the circumstances that surrounded the Benghazi attack.
- On 24 September, Mitt Romney raised the administration’s evolving views regarding the Benghazi attack, and an alleged lack of preparedness, as an issue in the 2012 U.S. Presidential campaign.
- On 26 September, Press Secretary Carney publicly declared that the Obama administration considered the Benghazi attack a terrorist incident.
- On 27 September, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta confirmed that terrorists planned and executed the Benghazi attack. Republicans continued to criticize the administration’s explanation of the incident, and the alleged security policy shortfalls they believed allowed it to happen.
- On 4 October, a team of FBI investigators arrived on the ground in Benghazi to investigate the scene of the attack. They departed after about 12 hours.



*President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton Attend Transfer of Remains Ceremony at Andrews Air Force Base, [Wikipedia](#), 2012*

## Weapons Systems in Play during the Attack

A key issue surrounding the Benghazi incident is whether it was a planned terrorist attack as opposed



*Machine Gun, 7.62mm, M240  
[Wikipedia](#), 2012*



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to random violence carried out by a spontaneously-formed mob. Weapons used by the perpetrators provide some important clues. Nearly three hours after Ambassador Stevens died in the residence building at the consulate, the survivors who had taken refuge at the CIA annex came under indirect fire, apparently from mortars. The accuracy of this mortar fire, which killed two former Navy SEALs, revealed a high degree of competence and training on the part of whoever manned the weapons. According to one Libyan observer, the militants probably acquired these skills through experience gained during the revolution that brought down Colonel Qaddafi's regime. Witnesses also noted that militants used small arms and RPGs to overwhelm the small force of defenders at the main consulate compound. Members of the ad hoc QRF that formed at the CIA annex commented that on their way to Ambassador Stevens' location, they were both outmanned and outgunned by the attacking militants. Driving to the compound required traversing a narrow street that became a gauntlet of AK-47 fire delivered at point-blank range. Hand grenades tossed under their vehicle were the probable reason that the convoy arrived at its destination with two blown tires.



CIA security personnel and contractor security guards routinely carry small arms. Some heavier weapons were also available to the Benghazi defenders. The Global Response Staff (GRS) element of the second (Tripoli-based) relief force had access to M240 7.62mm machine guns, the U.S. military lightweight version of a French-made, gas operated, belt-fed medium machine gun that fires a standard NATO round. These weapons were fitted with PEQ-15 lasers. The PEQ-15 can toggle between a visible mode that places a red dot on the prospective target, and a passive mode, invisible to the naked eye, but capable of identifying hostiles when friendly shooters are wearing helmets equipped with Night Observation Devices (NODS). Terrorists operating without benefit of NODS have been known to use cell phones as a means of tracking and intercepting PEQ-15s set to the passive laser mode.

The QRF team formed at the CIA annex in Benghazi also had Ground Laser Designators (GLDs) at their disposal. GLDs emit a scrambled signal that can be acquired by overhead air support. Just after 2300 Benghazi time—roughly an hour and a half after the attack on the consulate began, two unarmed Predator drones hovered overhead, providing a live video stream to State Department and DOD observers in Tripoli, AFRICOM, and Washington. One drone had been diverted from a position over Darnah. The other, dispatched from Sigonella Air Base in Sicily, acted as a back-up to the first drone, which was running low on fuel and nearing the end of its



# OEA Team Threat Report



mission cycle. Because armed drones or other close air support (CAS) would require authorization by the Libyan government to fly over populated areas like Benghazi, CAS was unavailable when the attack on the consulate occurred.

## Analyst's Assessment

Beyond the recriminations that are almost unavoidable when a national tragedy occurs in the midst of a U.S. presidential campaign, shining a spotlight on systemic blind spots and shortfalls based on what we know to this point may offer some lessons helpful in avoiding a recurrence in the future. One such shortfall is a tendency, if not toward complacency, at least to becoming too comfortable when confronted with post-revolutionary environments wherein newly installed regimes appear to show a friendly disposition toward the United States. Under such circumstances, given the perennial reality of budget constraints, a mindset can easily set in conducive to pursuing an economy of force approach to providing security for Foreign Service professionals assigned to diplomatic posts overseas. This, in turn, creates a tendency to rely heavily on contracted indigenous security forces as a cost saving measure.

Clearly, the post-Qaddafi regime in Libya was and still is favorably disposed to U.S. interests. Prior to the Benghazi attack, this positive variable in the equation may have obscured the Libyan government's very real lack of capacity to adequately fill the political power vacuum that ensued after Qaddafi's downfall. Where government authority ended, the strength of local militias rose to the fore, and on balance, the environment they created was anything but helpful in building a cohesive security infrastructure in support of a nascent national government. In reality, the patchwork of local militias that emerged created conditions on the ground so chaotic that they sometimes approached a state of anarchy. Prior to the Benghazi incident, these conditions seemed insufficiently sinister to give U.S. diplomats in Libya a sense of being in imminent personal danger. In the absence of a catalyst, surrounded as they were by pro-government militias like the February 17 Brigade and local national contractors hired to protect them, American diplomats on the ground may have considered their circumstances more secure than was actually the case.

The advantage of hindsight clearly indicates that the environment which prevailed in Libya in the days leading up to the Benghazi attack lent itself to infiltration by local and non-Libyan threat actors who possessed the capacity and will to manipulate events on the ground according to their skewed terrorist beliefs and agenda. Although lacking sufficient popular appeal to attain power, they remained ready, willing, and able to lock onto any target of opportunity that appeared within their sphere of influence. During the first week of September



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2012, one such threat actor was Ansar al-Shariah—a cluster of local militants believed to have links to AQIM.



A spin-off of the controversy over whether the Benghazi attack was a pre-planned terrorist event as opposed to a spontaneous act of mob violence is the probability that militants are capable of maintaining an array of on-the-shelf plans that can be set in motion to exploit unanticipated contingencies. Some bystanders who witnessed the attack on the American consulate on the evening of 11 September commented on the presence of Ansar al-Sharia members who told them that the “Innocence of Muslims” video was the catalyst that ignited their anger and inspired them to attack the compound. This clearly

indicates that either a plan already existed, or that one was formulated and set in motion in a matter of hours.

Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned (or perhaps relearned) from the Benghazi attack is that seemingly minor physical security oversights can produce disastrous consequences under the stress of unexpected emergencies. This factor underscores the different cultures that prevail within the Department of State and the Department of Defense. Although levels of sensitivity relative to the need for constant vigilance to deter terrorist threats vary among commands and from installation to installation, Army training imparts an almost universal appreciation among Soldiers for the necessity of keeping personal protective gear readily accessible. A former Special Operator who survived the Benghazi attack declared that Ambassador Stevens would still be alive today if the safe room in the consulate compound had been equipped with an adequate ventilation system. Why this deficiency existed is currently under scrutiny by the various Department of State and other agencies investigating the circumstances surrounding the Benghazi episode.

Formerly broad local discretion apparently prevailed within the State Department with regard to standardizing and implementing physical security procedures. In the post-Benghazi world of diplomacy, it is not inconceivable that issuing and maintaining a prescribed inventory of personal protective masks will become mandatory for Foreign Service personnel. Events have



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already grimly demonstrated that such seemingly mundane considerations may mean the difference between life and death for diplomats posted overseas. It is important to note that on the night of 11 September 2012, attacking militants never succeeded in overrunning the CIA annex, the tactical operations center in the main compound, or the safe room where Ambassador Stephens and Mr. Smith first sought refuge. Both Stevens and Smith died of smoke inhalation.

The best course now is to learn what we can from the Benghazi tragedy, commit the resources required to shore up physical security measures and QRF capacity at American missions overseas, and avoid any policy that might give the impression that the U.S. is blindly striking back in a way that fails to distinguish friend from foe in the region. The understandable sense of public outrage over the loss of four American lives has obscured several important considerations. Libyans died alongside Americans in defense of the consular grounds. In the immediate aftermath of the incident, senior Libyan officials held a memorial service for the deceased, formally went on record condemning the violence, and extended their sympathies to the American families who had lost loved ones. Secretary of State Clinton, in an address to Washington staffers, reminded her audience that it was the Libyan security forces that ultimately dislodged militants from the consulate grounds and led the surviving Americans to safety. An officer in the pro-American February 17 Brigade incurred personal risk to retrieve Ambassador Stevens' body and return it to QRF personnel for ultimate transport to the United States. Most important of all, thousands of Libyan citizens took to the streets to vent their anger at hostile militia members believed responsible for the Benghazi attack. They overran the headquarters of Ansar al-Sharia and demanded that their government exert its authority over rogue militia groups. Members of the Free Generation Movement in Libya were shamed by the events of 11 September 2012. The only Arab population in the Middle East predisposed to friendly relations with the United States remains an asset worth cultivating for the future.

## Training Implications

- The enemy will use expedients such as cell phones to neutralize an opponent's advantage in laser systems or electronic surveillance technology.
- Willingness to attack diplomatic missions staffed with noncombatants demonstrates insurgents' contempt for the Law of Land Warfare.
- Terrorists may maintain on-the-shelf plans that enable them to convert unanticipated or short-notice events into target of opportunity missions.
- Ventilation systems and the availability of personal protective masks comprise a vital dimension of physical security planning to deter or defeat an insurgent attack.





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- Insurgents will infiltrate local security forces to conduct reconnaissance.
- Training scenarios that use role players to portray demonstrators could test a unit's ability to adapt to situations where a localized threat morphs into a major international incident.

## Related Products

Follow these links to view related products:

- Al Shabaab Update (November 2012)
- Attack at PAF Base Minhas (August 2012)
- Taliban Attack on Camp Bastion (October 2012)

See also the [Red Diamond Newsletter](#), which contains current articles on a variety of topics useful to both soldiers and civilians ranging from enemy TTP to the nature and analysis of various threat actors.

For detailed information on weapons and equipment, see the [Worldwide Equipment Guide](#).

AKO: <https://www.us.army.mil/suite/portal/index.jsp>

**Threat Products: AKO "Easy-Link"**  
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## POCs

OEA Team  
913-684-7920 (COMM)  
552-7920 (DSN)  
913-684-7929 (COMM)  
552-7929 (DSN)

TRADOC G-2 Intelligence Support Activity (TRISA)  
Complex Operational Environment and Threat Integration Directorate (CTID)  
803 Harrison Drive, BLDG 467  
Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027

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