

A "Major Terrorist Event" Case Study: Benghazi, Libya on September 11, 2012

Written by Robert Tugwell

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

A "Major Terrorist Event" Case Study: Benghazi, Libya on September 11, 2012

<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/01/29/a-major-terrorist-event-case-study-benghazi-libya-on-september-11-2012/>

ROBERT TUGWELL, JAN 29 2016

A "Major Terrorist Event" Case Study: September 11, 2012 Attacks Against the United States of America Diplomatic Mission and Central Intelligence Agency Station in Benghazi, Libya.

What Made These Attacks a "Major Terrorist Event"?

During September (Sep) 11 and 12, 2012 armed militants attacked the United States [of America] (US/USA) diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya as well as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) annex to the US diplomatic compound. The US death toll numbered four: the US ambassador, John Christopher Stevens; an information management officer of the US Foreign Service, Sean Smith; and two CIA contractors, Tyrone Snowden Woods and Glen Anthony Doherty. Official reporting suggests that seven Libyans employed as security officers by the US diplomatic mission were injured during the attacks, and as of Aug 2013 reports suggest that seven Americans were injured.

Whilst there is no international agreement as to what constitutes a "major terrorist event", the National Consortium for the study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) defines a "successful [terrorist] attack" according to the "tangible effects" of the attack: "For example, in a typical successful bombing, the bomb detonates and destroys property and/or kills individuals, whereas an unsuccessful bombing is one in which the bomb is discovered and defused or detonates early and kills the perpetrators. Success is not judged in terms of the larger goals of the perpetrators. For example, a bomb that exploded in a building would be counted as a success even if it did not, for example, succeed in bringing the building down or inducing government repression".

Regardless of the wider strategic and political goals of Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL) and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the group which claimed responsibility for the attacks (AS) and the group suspected of the overarching planning and execution of the attacks (AQIM); the killing of a serving US ambassador (the eighth to be killed in the line of duty, and the first to die in office since 1988) as well as three other government officials justifies defining these attacks as a major terrorist event. This justification is ratified by the significant political aftermath of the attacks, which included: much debate on Capitol Hill, criticism of the Obama administration's preparedness for and handling of the attacks, as well as a report from an independent Accountability Review Board in the USA which found that "systemic failures and leadership and management deficiencies at senior levels in the State Department led to inadequate security at the US mission in Benghazi".

Event Map

Prior to the attacks there had been reports of suspicious activity taking place in Benghazi which concerned the United States Department of State Diplomatic Security Service (DSS) special agents as well as the CIA security contractors detailed to protect US interests in the city. These reports included suggestion of potential police collaboration with or infiltration by elements hostile to the US mission. For example, uniformed police officers mounting overt, unauthorised surveillance operations against the American compounds.

A "Major Terrorist Event" Case Study: Benghazi, Libya on September 11, 2012

Written by Robert Tugwell

Two attacks were initiated in Benghazi on Sep 11, 2011. Initially, at nightfall the diplomatic mission compound was partially overrun and then set alight. The surrounding streets had been cordoned by heavy civilian wheeled vehicles, some of which were emblazoned with the logo of ASL. An estimated 150 – 200 men armed with assault rifles, hand grenades, rocket propelled grenades, and with fire support provided by “technical” vehicles (flatbed and pickup trucks mounted with anti aircraft weaponry – commonly the *DSHK*) attacked the compound. During the early phases of the assault, Ambassador Stevens and Sean Smith were locked by DSS special agents into the establishment “safe room”. The attackers were unable to breach the defences of the safe room; but ultimately this was a decision which led to the 2 x suffocation / smoke inhalation deaths (Amb. Stevens and Sean Smith) as a result of the fire engulfing the buildings.

The CIA security team located at the annex made several requests to be allowed to move to support and defend the personnel at the diplomatic mission. These requests were denied, or ignored, and various additional offers made by US Special Operations Command to despatch Africa based Special Operations Forces to provide support were not immediately exploited. However, a team of Special Operations Forces and CIA operators did deploy from Tripoli in order to assist in Benghazi.

A US withdrawal (in parts under enemy fire) to the CIA annex followed the attack upon the diplomatic mission compound. Once at the annex, defensive positions were established, with paramilitary operators, DSS special agents and any CIA or US foreign service officers with military experience protecting the “non-shooters” amongst the American contingent. The team which had deployed from Tripoli was escorted from the airport to the CIA annex in convoy by elements of the February 17th Martyrs Brigade, a group officially friendly to US interests (and in fact a key contingent within the US security plan prior to the events of Sep 11), however with a lot of their true loyalties unknown. Two members of this team were CIA paramilitary security operators Tyrone Woods, and Glen Doherty, both of whom would be killed by indirect (mortar) fire during the ensuing defence of the CIA annex against multiple small arms fire and attempted base overrun attacks.

It was during this time that Amb. Stevens (critically ill, but alive) was recovered by local Libyans from the diplomatic mission compound and transported to the Benghazi Medical Centre. After attempts at cardiopulmonary resuscitation the ambassador would eventually die at this hospital. Eventually all remaining US personnel were evacuated by convoy from the CIA annex to the airport, and then moved onward. The body of Amb. Stevens was returned into the custody of US forces and repatriated along with the bodies of the other three fatalities to the USA.

Perpetrators

The exact identity and affiliation of the attackers remains uncertain; ASL publicly claimed responsibility for the attacks but there is little consensus as to how much planning and leadership they provided. However it is widely agreed that ASL participated in the Sep 2012 attacks. The US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) produced a report in Jul 12 which discussed the founding of ASL, a report which was referenced in the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence review of the Sep 2012 attacks. There is also much debate as to the level of AQIM involvement in the planning and execution of the assaults: in an addition to the Senate review, the CIA stated that “we do know that Islamic extremists with ties to Al-Qaeda participated in the attack”. Laub and Masters writing for the Council on Foreign Relations state that “Hillary Clinton and the former head of Africa Command, General Carter Ham are among senior US officials who said there were “links” between AQIM and the Libyan militants who attacked the US diplomatic mission in September 2012, but these allegations have not been substantiated in subsequent reporting or unclassified investigations”.

ASL (“Partisans of Islamic Law in Syria”) is a militia which advocates the implementation of strict Sharia law in Libya. The group consists of former rebels from various other Libyan Islamist militias; their first major public appearance was in June 2012 when they rallied in Benghazi’s Tahrir Square, displaying their truck-mounted heavy weaponry and demanding the imposition of Sharia law. ASL’s activities have included military strikes against non-Islamist armed and political groups in Libya, in conjunction with other jihadist militias, as well as the destruction of Sufi shrines which they deem idolatrous. ASL’s leader in Sep 2012 was the “Emir” Mohamed al-Zahawi, who died in Jan 2015.

A "Major Terrorist Event" Case Study: Benghazi, Libya on September 11, 2012

Written by Robert Tugwell

AQIM is an Al-Qaeda affiliate which operates in the Sahara and Sahel. In the 2000s the Algerian Islamist group the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) aligned with Al-Qaeda. This union was announced on Sep 11, 2006 by Ayman al-Zawahiri (Al-Qaeda leader who at the time was Osama Bin Laden's deputy) and GSPC was renamed AQIM in early 2007.

In Jun 2014, US Special Operations Forces captured a Libyan named Ahmed Abu Khattala in Benghazi, in order to bring him to trial in the USA for involvement in leading the Benghazi attacks. Abu Khattala was imprisoned under Gaddafi rule for holding Islamist views, and after the fall of the regime was involved in forming ASL. The US authorities allege that he was a primary figure in the planning and execution of the assaults.

Assessment – Targets, Tactics and Impact

The US diplomatic mission compound in Benghazi (as the seat of American foreign interests in the city) and the annex housing the USA's primary intelligence service were obvious targets for those seeking to "send a message" to the West. Although it is disputed and debated (with the prevailing outcome being that it is highly unlikely) as to whether the release of the controversial movie *The Innocence of Muslims* was the prime catalyst for the attacks; general poor feeling regarding the West (set against the wider context of the Arab Spring etc) features heavily in the selection of target set.

Cordoning a street with heavy, vehicle mounted weaponry, and then following on with multiple mass assaults on two locations (including probing attacks on the CIA annex) with small arms fire and grenades suggests a level of planning beyond the abilities of most "average" disgruntled civilians. Even in this North African city which contains a large amount of people with access to automatic weaponry. However it is surprising that with the availability of relatively "heavy" weaponry, matched against the stall in support at the strategic and political levels in the USA (delayed deployment of supporting assets), that there was not a much higher death toll on the side of the US.

It is unknown what the aim of the attacks was – if the assaulters or their organisers sought to capture Amb. Stevens alive for whatever purpose then this was unsuccessful. However if their aim was solely to cause as much destruction as possible then it is arguable that this was fairly successfully achieved. The deaths of four US personnel engaged in foreign service (including an ambassador) is, as described in the introduction a large part of the rationale for this being classified as a "major terrorist event".

The impact of this major terrorist event goes far beyond four US and hundreds of Libyan deaths and injuries (mostly killed and injured during the attacks on the CIA station), as well as burned out and abandoned compounds. There have been numerous international political implications concerning the USA, Libya and other Middle East and North African countries – as well as implications for the way that other nations conduct the security of their diplomatic missions in the region. Of particular note however has been the impact of this major terrorist event upon the domestic politics of the USA. Not a week has gone by during the ongoing 2016 US Presidential Campaign when Hillary Clinton has not received sustained and focused criticism for her perceived mishandling of the response to the Benghazi attacks, including claims that lies were told to the American public regarding the reasoning for the attacks (*The Innocence of Muslims*, discussed above).

Conclusion – How This event Fits Into the Groups' (x2) Aims and Objectives, Structure and Strategy

Regardless of which specific group or grouping authorised, planned and executed the attack; this major terrorist event fits into the aims and objectives of most extremist Islamist groups seeking to attack the West, specifically the United States of America. This event conforms more naturally to the structure of ASL – in that it seemed to involve a militia formed from the merger of many other previously extant Islamist militias. An attack of 150+ well armed (of the particular sorts of weaponry which was used) attackers is more likely to implicate a militia organisation than a cell-based, purely Al-Qaeda affiliate.

AQIM, as with all Al-Qaeda affiliate movements is cell based, and their cell structure tends to be small (or at least it certainly tended to be in North Africa in 2011). Whilst it would not have been an insurmountable challenge for AQIM

A "Major Terrorist Event" Case Study: Benghazi, Libya on September 11, 2012

Written by Robert Tugwell

elements in Libya to launch the Benghazi attacks it is less likely or certainly more unusual. This is due to the probable requirement for many cells to merge, and for heavy truck mounted anti aircraft weaponry to have been procured (whereas AQIM cells tend to focus on other activities, for example terrorist "spectaculars" (large attacks) involving the emplacement of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) or the use of Person Borne IEDs ("suicide bombers").

This collection of incidents (the "major terrorist event" which was the Benghazi attacks) ultimately assisted in the ongoing destabilisation of post-Gaddafi Libya, and advanced multiple extremist Islamist causes. The domestic (USA and Libya) and international ramifications are still being felt today, and the legacy of the attacks and the deaths will continue to have an impact upon the ever changing and developing international security, or insecurity situation.

Bibliography

Libya Herald (2012), *No Libyans died in Benghazi attack*, <http://www.libyaherald.com/2012/09/15/no-libyans-died-in-benghazi-attack/#axzz3fPQWHQOQ>, accessed 6 Jul 2015.

Central News Network (CNN) (2013), *Exclusive: Dozens of CIA operatives on the ground during Benghazi attack*, <http://thelead.blogs.cnn.com/2013/08/01/exclusive-dozens-of-cia-operatives-on-the-ground-during-benghazi-attack>, accessed 6 Jul 2015.

START, *Successful Attack*, <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/more/What-AttackInformation-SuccessfulAttack.aspx>, accessed 9 Jul 2015.

Ryan, Erica (2012), *Chronology: The Benghazi Attack and The Fallout*, National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/2012/11/30/166243318/chronology-the-benghazi-attack-and-the-fallout>, accessed 9 Jul 2015.

Zuckoff, Michael (2014), *13 Hours: The explosive true story of how six men fought a terror attack and repelled enemy forces*.

United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (2014), *Review of the Terrorist Attacks on US Facilities in Benghazi, Libya, September 11-12, 2012 together with Additional Views*, <http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/documents/world/senate-intelligence-committee-report-on-benghazi-attack/748/>, accessed 10 Jul 2015.

Laub, Zachary and Masters, Jonathan (2015), *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb*, Council on Foreign Relations, <http://www.cfr.org/terrorist-organizations-and-networks/al-qaeda-islamic-maghreb-aqim/p12717>, accessed 10 Jul 2015.

Irshaid, Faisal (2014), *Profile: Libya's Ansar al-Sharia*, BBC Monitoring, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-27732589>, accessed 14 Jul 2015.

The Economist (2014), *Drawing the battle lines*, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21603508-stage-set-lengthy-struggle-power-drawing-battle-lines>, accessed 16 Jul 2015.

Maher, Ahmed (2012), *Meeting Mohammed Ali al-Zahawi of Libyan Ansar al-Sharia*, BBC Arabic, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-19638582>, accessed 16 Jul 2015.

DeYoung, Karen and Goldman, Adam and Tate, Julie for the Washington Post (2014), *U.S. captured Benghazi suspect in secret raid*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-captured-benghazi-suspect-in-secret-raid/2014/06/17/7ef8746e-f5cf-11e3-a3a5-42be35962a52_story.html, accessed 4 Nov 2015.

A "Major Terrorist Event" Case Study: Benghazi, Libya on September 11, 2012

Written by Robert Tugwell

Written by: Robert Tugwell

Written at: The University of St Andrews

Written for: Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence

Date written: July 2015