

Crisis in the Middle East: Militias, Movie Producers and Military Might

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Arab News

Twenty-four hours after Al-Qaeda's Hassan Mohammed Qaed (aka Abu Yahya Al-Libi) was killed in a drone strike in June, a group calling itself Brigades of Imprisoned Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman detonated an IED outside the US Consulate in Benghazi.

Filming, they interspersed their video with images of Osama bin Laden and released it online. Previously on May 22, the same group targeted the Red Cross in Benghazi, demanding the release of Sheikh Abdul Rahman, imprisoned in America for the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Five days after the June attack, they used RPGs to attack two guards at the British Consulate — again in Benghazi — and on June 12 hit the Red Cross in Misrata.

Drones began flying over Derna in east Libya, home to the 200-300-strong militants. US Ambassador to Libya Chris Stevens said in a 2008 diplomatic cable that Derna was a “well-spring of Libyan foreign fighters” for Al-Qaeda, having sent more men than anywhere in the world to Iraq to fight. Violence escalating, Frederic Wehrey wrote in Foreign Affairs in July, “Hired guns might be sowing the seeds for the country’s descent into warlordism.”

On Sept. 10, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, in a lengthy Al-Shabab video declared Al-Libi’s “...blood is calling, urging and inciting you to fight and kill the crusaders.”

Despite all these events in Benghazi, as the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks drew closer the US Consulate remained almost unsecured. Normally Marines protect diplomatic buildings, but Benghazi used for-hire Libyan police units and limited US security personnel. By then, an Islamophobic video had gone viral throughout the Arab world.

Two days before Al-Libi was killed, a man claiming to be an Israeli Jew uploaded a 14-minute film trailer, professed to cost \$5 million and funded by 100 wealthy Jewish donors. Pretending the name Sam Basseley and faking a “thick accent,” he told the 80 actors hired that it was an historical film about an Egyptian from 2,000 years ago, pre-dating Islam. Called Desert Warriors, the main character was ‘Master George’, one woman was Condelisa, and another was named Hillary.

“Muhammad,” “Islam,” “Qur’an” or “Allah” was not uttered during filming and the cast had no clue they were being set up to be dubbed later. Their only guilt was feigning acting in an unspeakably bad film.

When production ended, the title became Innocence of Muslims, and mouthing ‘Master George’ made it easy to insert ‘Muhammad’ over the actor’s words.

The filmmaker was actually Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, a Coptic Christian from Egypt long in America. A voracious Islam-hater he has twice spent time in prison. In 1997, he was

sentenced to one year plus three years' probation on narcotics offenses, with an additional year for violating his parole. In 2010, having used multiple aliases to forge identities and create false bank accounts, he served 21 months in prison for fraud, fined \$790,000 in restitution, and was forbidden to use computers for five years.

Costing \$60,000 to really produce, its opening was a bust. But Nakoula was not in the cinema. He instead sat opposite, sweating and nervously watching the entrance, causing police officers to question him, and later confirming that he had no accent.

On Sept. 4, the video was translated into Arabic. Egyptian television aired portions of it on the Sept. 8, linking it to crazed Florida pastor Terry Jones. Nakoula did work with extremist fanatics, but Jones was merely one promoting his film; another was vehement Islamophobe Morris Sadek, head of the National American Coptic Assembly.

Steve Klein, former Marine and Vietnam vet who trained Christian fundamentalists to become paramilitary militias — on church grounds — was also on-board. Klein insists that Muslim Brotherhood sleeper cells exist throughout America awaiting instructions to “begin randomly killing as many of us as they can.” The film would draw them out, he said, a “piece of cake.”

Once the Arabic-language video circulated, Nakoula diverted attention by blaming Israelis (a true blood libel), putting not only Jews at risk but handing over the entire Coptic community to danger.

By lunchtime on Sept. 11, crowds gathered at the Benghazi consulate. Foreign service officer Sean Smith became suspicious seeing the police-subcontractors taking photographs of the building. A group of gunmen arrived and melded with the protesters, and by 9.30 p.m. began shooting and hurling grenades over the walls. At about the same time a convoy of armored vehicles with black flags headed toward the consulate, carrying 20 to 50 militants armed with AK47 machineguns and RPGs. At 12.49 am, Smith messaged friends in his online science-fiction gaming community: “Assuming we don’t die tonight,” he wrote, “We saw one of our ‘police’ that guard the compound taking pictures.” The gunmen then stormed the walls and gates, setting fire to the main building.

Outmanned and after an hour of fighting, security and staff fled to a safe house but Ambassador Stevens (visiting Benghazi for the week), Sean Smith and another security officer took refuge in a small room. As smoke poured in, the security officer escaped.

By then a joint US-Libyan security group had landed from Tripoli to fly the staffers to safety, and headed toward the safe house. Security forces within the consulate appear to have tipped off the incoming convoy with the safe house location, and arriving just as the militants did, the rescue force managed to evacuate 37 consulate personnel before a shootout began. Ten Libyans and two Americans were killed, the militants escaped, and Smith was found dead. Stevens was missing: Libyan witnesses saw him collapsed from smoke inhalation and rushed him to the hospital where he was pronounced dead. (Stevens was the eighth US ambassador killed in office, the first since Arnold Lewis Raphel died with President Zia ul-Haq in a mysterious plane crash in Pakistan in 1988.)

A US administration official insisted there had been a “robust American security presence” in force in Benghazi, and intelligence officials reported that no surveillance had suggested a forthcoming attack. What began as a genuine protest had been infiltrated, become violent, and ended in 14 deaths in a foreseeable 9/11-anniversary threat.

It was a diplomatic crisis.

On Sept. 13 1980, Ronald Reagan — in response to the Iranian embassy crisis — said, “the United States should agree to virtually all the new demands of Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini in return for the prompt release of the American hostages.”

By complete contrast exactly 32 years later, Mitt Romney accused President Obama of sympathizing with terrorists, and demanded an “overwhelming force” of “military might” put henceforth into action. Were Romney president, his foreign policy adviser decided, none of this would have even happened. For his part, Nakoula simply said that security ought to have been better. “America should do something to change it,” he told the Associated Press.

Diplomacy clearly anathema, President Obama vowed to seek justice. Two Navy destroyers with Tomahawk missiles were immediately dispatched from the Mediterranean to the Libyan coast near the oil refineries, airspace in Benghazi was shut down, drone surveillance-maneuvers intensified, the CIA and FBI arrived, and 50 rapid response Marines were sent to Tripoli. The following day, destroyers and Marines were ordered to Yemen and Sudan, the latter rejecting them. Targeting Britain’s Prince Harry in Afghanistan, two Marines were killed in a Taleban attack, and the US evacuated its Tunisian Embassy on Sept.15.

President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton were at Andrews Air Force Base when the bodies of the Americans returned. “America must keep leading the world,” she charged. The president echoed the sentiment: “The United States will never retreat from the world” because this “sets us apart from other nations.” Quoting Biblical scripture, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends,” he said.

It is this fundamental character of human nature co-opted by the United States over the past decade that causes a sea of black flags to swim through the region in protest to this very point today. Revolutions grappling with growing pains, men are laying down their lives to defend family, faith and homeland. Patriotism to America is regarded as the highest honor, yet patriotism to Islam is viewed as a threat. The war on terror has become the war ‘of’ terror, and will be the longest war in American history because it is open-ended, no state defined, no enemy named. The Authorization for the Use of Military Force Against Terrorists (AUMF) permitting military action against any threat to Americans renewed, US citizens are not exempt from target — as evidenced by the illegal assassination of Anwar Al-Awlaki — neither capture nor trial needed.

This time an American Christian has provoked mass bloodshed, resulting in diplomatic deaths.

Mission accomplished, how will the United States handle his incitements to violence?

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