

State Department Officials Sanctioned for Benghazi Attack

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The disciplining of four State Department officials Wednesday—and the report issued by the inquiry into the attack on the US consulate and a secret CIA facility in Benghazi, Libya—amount to an official coverup of the real issues involved in the bloody events last September. In particular, there is a concerted attempt to prevent any discussion of the US alliance with al Qaeda-linked militias, both in Libya and now in Syria.

The report on the attack, which claimed the lives of the US ambassador to Libya J. Christopher Stevens and three other US personnel, was released on Tuesday by an Accountability Review Board. It concluded: “Systemic failures and leadership management deficiencies at senior levels within two bureaus of the State Department resulted in a Special Mission security posture that was inadequate for Benghazi and grossly inadequate to deal with the attack that took place.”

While the board’s report cited “a lack of leadership and management ability” among mid-level State Department officials, it concluded that there was no gross dereliction of duty and recommended no disciplinary action.

Nonetheless, the report brought about the resignation of the head of the department’s Diplomatic Security Bureau, Eric Boswell, and the disciplining of three other lower-ranking officials, who are to be reassigned. Among them was the deputy assistant secretary responsible for embassy security, Charlene Lamb, who testified before Congress in October that the consulate in Benghazi had been given the appropriate level of security.

The investigative panel was limited in its inquiry to the questions of whether security procedures at the Benghazi consulate were adequate and properly implemented. It steered clear of any consideration of who was responsible for the September 11 attack or the motive behind it. It said this was in deference to an ongoing FBI probe, which appears to be going nowhere.

The practical conclusions flowing from the report include a stepped-up militarization of US embassies abroad. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has asked Congress for an additional \$750 million to hire 150 more security officers, while the Pentagon has agreed to deploy another 225 Marine guards at diplomatic posts facing significant threat levels.

The report confirmed the intensity of the military assault on the US facilities, saying that it included “arson, small arms and machine gun fire, and the use of RPGs, grenades and mortars” against both the consulate compound and the secret CIA annex. Dozens of armed men stormed into the compound and used cans of fuel stored for a generator to set fire to both buildings and vehicles.

Chairing the review board were Thomas Pickering, a former top State Department official, and Adm. Mike Mullen, the retired former chief of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, both trusted figures in keeping state secrets.

In his remarks in presenting the report, Mullen pointed to problems in the assessment of the Islamist militias in Libya and in particular Benghazi. "We found that there was no immediate tactical warning of the September 11 attacks, but there was a knowledge gap in the intelligence community's understanding of extremist militias in Libya and the potential threat they posed to US interests," he said.

The report indicates that this "knowledge gap" extended to the February 17 Martyrs' Brigade, the Libyan militia that had been contracted to provide security for the Benghazi consulate. This militia raised no alarm during the assault and did not fight the attackers. It was unclear whether it joined in the assault.

"At the time of Ambassador Stevens' visit, February 17 militia members had stopped accompanying Special Mission vehicle movements in protest over salary and working hours," the report said.

Mullen described the February 17 brigade as "a very loose group of local militias that float in and out of that umbrella over time."

The report also found that the response of the Libyan government to the attacks was "profoundly lacking," merely confirming "both weak capacity and near absence of central government influence and control in Benghazi."

The report placed a significant share of the blame on Ambassador Stevens himself, declaring that "His status as the leading US government advocate on Libya policy, and his expertise on Benghazi in particular, caused Washington to give unusual deference to his judgments." It noted that his security team was "not fully aware of planned movements" by the ambassador in Benghazi.

Republican members of Congress, who have waged a heated partisan campaign over the Benghazi attacks since September, were disappointed in the report, because it made no indictment of the Obama administration's response. It concluded that this response was "timely and appropriate, but there simply was not enough time for armed US military assets to have made a difference."

While it confirmed that early statements by the administration that the attack had originated in a spontaneous demonstration over a virulently anti-Muslim video produced in the US were false, there is little political mileage to be gained from this. Susan Rice, the US ambassador to the UN who put this line forward in a series of talk show interview days after the attack, has already been forced to withdraw her bid to become Secretary of State.

What neither the investigative board nor the politicians of either major party showed any interest in probing was the relationship between the September 11 attack and the policy being pursued by the US government in Libya and more broadly in the Middle East.

The security deal that the US mission had established with the February 17 militia was only part of a far wider relationship forged by Stevens and the State Department with Islamist militias both in the war for regime change that US and NATO waged last year to topple Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and in its aftermath. Forces that originated in the Libyan

Islamic Fighting Group, an al Qaeda-linked organization, played a central role in the US-backed war. Stevens, who was sent into Benghazi in the midst of this war played the leading role in establishing ties with these elements.

In the wake of the war, the CIA established a secret station in Benghazi whose size came as a shock to Libyan officials when it had to be evacuated in the aftermath of the September 11 attack. Significantly, the Accountability Review Board report—at least in its declassified form—makes not a single mention of the intelligence agency's role in the events.

The strategy first pursued in Libya of supporting Islamist militias to overthrow the regime has been repeated on an even larger scale in the brutal sectarian war for regime change being waged to topple Bashar al-Assad in Syria. A significant share of the Islamist foreign fighters and an even larger portion of arms flowing into this war have come from Libya.

There is every reason to believe that the secret CIA station in Benghazi was helping to coordinate this flow, which has been further supervised by another CIA station set up in southern Turkey to oversee the provision of arms and other aid to the so-called rebels in Syria.

The indications that Stevens and the other three Americans killed in Benghazi were the victims of "blowback" from a policy pursued by Washington of backing al Qaeda-linked forces to topple existing governments and tighten the US grip over the region are something that no one in the ruling political establishment wants subjected to public inquiry.

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