

The Benghazi Affair: Uncovering the Mystery of the Benghazi CIA Annex

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"The U.S. effort in Benghazi was at its heart a CIA operation, according to the officials who briefed on intelligence." WSJ, Nov 1, 2012

Hillary Clinton, the US Secretary of State, finally appeared before the US Senate and House Foreign Relations Committees on Wednesday, January 23, after a long delay. She was asked many questions by the Congress about what had happened in Benghazi on September 11 and how this could happen. The problem with the responses she gave to these questions was that she focused on the narrative presented in the State Department Report that had been released a month earlier, and which is deeply flawed.

In order to understand the nature of what happened on September 11, 2012 in Benghazi, and how the State Department under Hillary Clinton has been an important part of the cover up of what this second September 11 is actually a part of, it is important to understand the problem with the State Department Report being used to carry out the US government cover up of what I call the Benghazi Affair.

On December 18, the US State Department released its report on the September 11, 2012 attacks on two US facilities in Benghazi, Libya. These attacks had resulted in the deaths of the US Ambassador to Libya, Chris Stevens, and three other Americans working for the US government in Libya. The US government had claimed that its report would shed light on what had become a contentious Congressional and media debate over the cause and details of the attack on these two US government compounds in Benghazi.

Soon, however, it became clear that the State Department Report issued by the Accountability Review Board (hereafter ARB Report), offered the public little information to add to what had already been made available by the State Department or the media. Instead, the public version of the ARB Report, referred to as the "unclassified" version, actually functions as part of the cover-up of what happened on September 11, 2012 in Benghazi. Most of this public document carefully refrains from any discussion of the role or activities of the CIA and what bearing this had on the events of September 11-12 2012 in Benghazi. But the role of the CIA in Benghazi and its bearing on what happened there on September 11 is the crucial question that any legitimate investigation into the situation must explore.

The trick of the Accountability Review Board (ARB) was that it issued two different versions of its Report. One version was an "unclassified" report that was available to the press, the public and the US Congress to discuss in public.⁽¹⁾ The other version was a "classified" report that was to be hidden from public or press scrutiny and was only to be available to

Congress in a closed Congressional process. The unclassified version of the ARB Report could not mention the CIA activities. It could only discuss the role of the State Department in what happened.

The problem with such a restriction is that one of the US government sites in Benghazi that was attacked was a CIA facility referred to as the 'Annex' (hereafter CIA annex compound). The other site was allegedly a State Department administered facility referred to as the 'Special Mission Benghazi Compound' (hereafter special mission compound). This second compound, according to the WSJ, was actually created to provide diplomatic cover for the CIA facility.(2)

While some US Congressional Committees have been conducting investigations into what happened in Benghazi, they have agreed to discuss only the activities of the State Department in their open, public sessions, and to reserve any consideration or questions about the activities of the CIA for closed sessions of their committees, away from public view.(3)

Not only is the US Congress restricted from discussing the role of the CIA in Benghazi in open session, some of the mainstream US media have agreed to a request by the US government to withhold details about the CIA operations in Benghazi. The New York Times (NYT) is one such publication. (4) In an article briefly referring to the CIA annex compound, which the NYT says "encompassed four buildings inside a low-walled compound...." The NYT acknowledges that, "From among these buildings, the C.I.A. personnel carried out their secret missions." But then the article explains that, "The New York Times agreed to withhold locations and details of these operations at the request of Obama administration officials...."

To declare an investigation into or discussion of the activities regarding the role of the CIA and its Annex compound as a forbidden subject during an open committee meeting of Congress, is to prevent the US Congress from fulfilling its oversight obligations over the US Executive branch of government. For the US government to require the US media to restrict coverage is to shroud the needed public discussion and investigation in darkness.

The effort to cover up the role of the CIA in the events resulting in the attack on the two US government facilities in Benghazi, however, demonstrates that something important is at stake and worth investigating.

Despite the US government effort to impose such restrictions, there are media accounts and some Congressional documents that provide a glimpse into the details of hidden CIA activity that the attacks on the US facilities in Benghazi help to reveal.

To understand the nature of this hidden activity, requires a willingness not only to critique the official explanations, but also to examine the events that can help to uncover the actual forces at work in Benghazi and the role they played in CIA activities in Libya.

One Wall Street Journal (WSJ) article is particularly helpful. The article, is titled "CIA Takes Heat for Role in Libya." It provides a rare window into details of the murky world of the CIA operation in Benghazi and how it came about.(5)

The article notes that former CIA Director David Petraeus did not greet the bodies of the four Americans killed in Benghazi when they were returned to the US, even though two of those killed are acknowledged to have worked for the CIA. "Officials close to Mr. Petraeus," the

WSJ explains, “say he stayed away in an effort to conceal the agency’s role in collecting intelligence and providing security in Benghazi.”

Of the 30 or more American officials evacuated from Benghazi, only seven worked for the State Department. According to the WSJ, “Nearly all the rest worked for the CIA, under diplomatic cover, which was a principle purpose” of the special mission compound.

Soon after the struggle against the government of Libya began in February 2011, the CIA set up a compound in Benghazi for its spy operations. Eventually, the CIA gave its compound a State Department office name, the Annex, to disguise its purpose, the WSJ reveals. According to the US government, the role of the CIA in Benghazi was “focused on countering proliferation and terrorist threats....A main concern was the spread of weapons....”

“At the annex,” the WSJ explains, “many of the analysts and officers had what is referred to in intelligence circles as ‘light cover’ carrying U.S. diplomatic passports.”

Providing a cover for the secret operation of the CIA, however, created problems for State Department officials who felt the CIA was not “forthcoming with information,” even in the midst of the attack on the US facilities. As the WSJ notes, on September 11, 2012, “At 5:41 p.m. Eastern time, Mrs. Clinton called Mr. Petraeus. She wanted to make sure the two agencies were on the same page.”

Even after the attack was over and the analysts and officers had been evacuated, the accounts in the WSJ and McClatchy Newspapers, describe how quickly the CIA acted to clean out documents and equipment from the Annex. By contrast, the US government left the premises of the special mission compound unguarded and open to looters for weeks after the attack.

“The significance of the annex was a well-kept secret in Benghazi,” the WSJ reporters conclude. A McClatchy article documents how a well guarded secret was even the location of the CIA Annex compound. (6)

The implication is that the attackers at the special mission compound intended to flush out the covert location and presence of the CIA Annex compound so as to end its ability to continue its secret activities.(7)

An opinion piece, “The Fog of Benghazi”, appeared in the WSJ on November 3. It discusses what was at stake for the US government as a result of the September 11 attack in Benghazi(8): “America has since closed the Libya diplomatic outpost and pulled a critical intelligence unit out of a hotbed of Islamism, conceding a defeat. U.S. standing in the region and the ability to fight terrorist groups were undermined, with worrying repercussions for a turbulent Middle East and America’s security. This is why it’s so important to learn what happened in Benghazi.”

The effort to learn what happened in the Benghazi Affair, is similarly the subject of a 10 page letter dated October 19 sent by two US Congressmen to President Obama. (9) One of the Congressmen, Darrell Issa, is Chairman of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. The other, Jason Chaffetz, is Chairman of the House Subcommittee on National Security, Homeland Defense and Foreign Operations.

Their letter raises ten questions for President Obama, the answers to which they explain are

needed for the US Congressional investigation to determine the significance of the Benghazi affair. Also in their letter they include an attachment of 160 pages of data and photos which document the lawless environment in Libya, and particularly in Benghazi in the months before the Benghazi attack. This data was obtained by the US Congress from the State Department. (10) Though the data is labeled as sensitive, it is not classified material.

This data documents in a way that is now public, the perilous environment existing in Libya, providing a graphic description of the armed militias who carry out bombings, murders and kidnappings of government officials and others who try to challenge the lawlessness.

The data demonstrates the details of what the ARB Report acknowledges as “a general backdrop of political violence, assassinations, targeting former regime officials, lawlessness, and an overarching absence of central government authority in eastern Libya.” (11)

The Internet has made possible the publication of a number of investigative accounts of various aspects of the Benghazi Affair. Several of these propose that the CIA and even Chris Stevens were part of a gun running operation, gathering up weapons from Libya and facilitating their shipment to the insurgents fighting against the government in Syria. Some of the articles also propose that the CIA operation in Benghazi helped to send mercenaries from other countries to fight against the government of Syria. (12)

Fox News and a number of associated websites have featured articles which offer such accounts. Often, however, the articles rely on anonymous sources to support their claims.

Rarely are media offering accounts that portray this reality able to present direct evidence to support the narratives they develop.

An important exception is an article that appeared in the Times of London on September 14, 2012. This was three days after Chris Stevens and three other Americans were killed.

The article documents that a ship, the Al Entisar (also written as Intisaar or The Victory in English), sailing under a Libyan flag with a 400 ton cargo, which included SAM-7 surface-to-air anti-aircraft missiles and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and some humanitarian supplies, is said to have arrived September 6 at the Turkish Port of Iskenderun.(13)

The captain of the ship, Omar Mousaeeb, a Libyan from Benghazi, was accompanied by 26 Libyans who were on board to help smuggle the shipment from the Turkish Port across the border into Syria. The plan was then to distribute the weapons to insurgents in Syria who were allied with the Muslim Brotherhood.

This account by the Times of London provides specific details about the mechanisms and problems of this Libyan weapons pipeline to the insurgency in Syria. The article describes the conflict between the Muslim Brotherhood and other groups of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) over who would get the weapons from the Al Entisar shipment.

“The scale of the shipment and how it should be disbursed, has sparked a row between the FSA and the Muslim Brotherhood, who took control of the shipment when it arrived in Turkey,” writes Sheera Frenkel, the author of the Times of London article.

Though the ship arrived at the port in Turkey on September 6, not all of the cargo had been transported into Syria by September 14, the article notes, though this is over a week after the ship arrived at the port in Turkey. While “more than 80 percent of the ship’s cargo,” the

Times of London explains, “had been moved into Syria, Mr. Mousaeeb and a group of Libyans who had arrived with the ship said they were preparing to travel with the final load into Syria to ensure it was being distributed.” Actually their concern appeared to be to whom it was distributed, not how.

The Times of London refers to two Syrian activists with the FSA who complained that infighting within the insurgent ranks had delayed the arrival of the weapons in Syria, “There was widespread talk of Syrian groups who allied themselves with the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood movement being given a larger share of the ship’s cargo.” One activist quoted objects that, “The Muslim Brotherhood, through its ties with Turkey, was seizing control of this ship and its cargo.”

While the Times of London does not directly link Chris Stevens or the CIA annex compound to the Al Entisar arms shipment to Turkey, the article does provide an important context for how the conflict over which insurgent group would get weapons from the shipment created a source of significant tension at the very time the attack on the two US compounds in Benghazi took place.

Given the question, “Why Chris Stevens would have traveled to Benghazi to be in this perilous environment on September 11,” an answer which points to some urgent matter which needed his attention, would help to provide the rationale for him to ignore the security considerations against his making such a trip.

Keeping in mind the importance of this shipment of weapons from Benghazi to Turkey, the need to work out the details of the weapons distribution process could very well have provided the motive for Stevens to plan a visit in Benghazi during such a perilous period as the 11th anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attack on the US.

By September 11, infighting among the Muslim Brotherhood and other insurgent groups, over who would be given the weapons from the Al Entisar shipment, suggests the likelihood that Turkey’s Consul General in Benghazi and the US Ambassador needed to discuss the conflict over the weapons and the problem of how they should be moved into Syria and distributed among the insurgent groups.

In line with this reasoning, it is not surprising that Chris Stevens had a meeting with Turkey’s Consul General to Benghazi, Ali Sait Akin on September 11 at the Benghazi special mission compound.

The description of the infighting over the Al Entisar shipment to a port in Turkey of weapons for the Syrian insurgency, raises the possibility that the Turkish Consul General to Benghazi and Stevens discussed the conflict over the weapons. As of September 11, there were weapons that had yet to be distributed and smuggled into Syria from the Al Entisar shipment.

On September 10, when Stevens arrived in Benghazi, the shipment of arms had only recently been received at the Turkish port of Iskenderun, and the conflict among the insurgent groups who were to receive the weapons was not yet resolved.

According to documents that Congress received from the State Department, soon after Stevens arrived in Benghazi on September 10, he visited the CIA annex compound for a briefing.

On September 11 he stayed at the special mission compound but had meetings scheduled with someone from the Arabian Gulf Oil Co. (AGOCO), and later in the afternoon with someone from the Al Marfa Shipping and Maritime Services Co. (The names of the individuals were blacked out.) Then he had dinner and discussion with Ali Sait Akin, Turkey's Consul General to Benghazi.(14)

While there has been no specific information made available by the State Department about the content of the meetings Stevens had on September 10 and 11, Turkey's role in the shipping of weapons and foreign fighters into Syria to assist the fight against the Syrian government is the subject of numerous articles. The Times of London article describes previous difficulty experienced in trying to ship a cargo of weapons to where they could be safely unloaded and moved to insurgents in Syria. Given this previous experience it is not surprising that it was necessary to have the Turkish government intervene to settle problems that arose with the Al Entisar weapons shipment. It had taken several weeks "to arrange the paperwork for the Turkish port authorities to release the cargo." (15) The Times of London quoted Suleiman Haari, who worked with Captain Mousaeb. Haari explained that "Everyone wanted a piece of the ship. Certain groups wanted to get involved and claim the cargo for themselves. It took a long time to work through the logistics."

This could account for the surprise visit by the then head of the CIA, David Petraeus on September 2 to Ankara. (16) Petraeus arrived in Ankara for what appeared to be talks with the President of Turkey and other Turkish government officials. Were Petraeus's meetings with Turkish government officials needed to help make the arrangements for the Libyan ship to dock at the port in Turkey and unload the weapons that were to be smuggled across the border into Syria? This is a question Petraeus could answer if he were to testify at a US Congressional hearing again.

In light of the WSJ claim that the special mission compound had been set up to provide diplomatic cover for the CIA operation run out of the Annex, the question is raised as to whether the special mission compound was actually a State Department facility or a CIA facility acting under cover as a State Department operation.

According to the unclassified version of the ARB Report, Chris Stevens had arrived in Benghazi on April 5, 2011, "via a Greek cargo ship at the rebel-held city of Benghazi to re-establish a U.S. presence in Libya." He had been appointed the US government's "Special Envoy to the Libyan Transitional National Council" (TNC), acting as an official contact between the insurgents fighting to overthrow the government of Libya and the US government that was aiding them to bring about regime change in Libya. (17) Such an activity is contrary to international law and provisions of the UN charter (Article 2 Sections 1, 4, 7) which prohibit interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. (18)

Stevens' mission, the Report states, "was to serve as the liaison with the TNC" for a post-Qaddafi government in Libya. The US embassy had been closed in February 2011, and was only reopened on September 22, 2011 with Gene Cretz as the Ambassador.

The ARB Report notes, however, that the CIA had set up the CIA compound in Benghazi in February 2011 soon after the insurgency arose against the Libyan government. This is a confirmation that the US government had put intelligence operatives on the ground in Benghazi just as the insurgency against the Libyan government was getting underway. This is also at least one month before Chris Stevens arrived in Benghazi.

The ARB Report also reveals that Chris Stevens stayed at the CIA Annex from the beginning of June, 2011 until June 21, 2011. Not until June 21 did “he and his security contingent move into what would become the Special Mission Benghazi compound....” According to the ARB Report the special mission compound in Benghazi was set up a few months after the CIA compound. (19)

This puts in perspective why the WSJ article on November 1 says that the special mission compound was established to provide diplomatic cover for the CIA facility, subsequently referred to as “the Annex”. Stevens remained as Special Envoy to the TNC and stayed in Benghazi until November 17, 2011. On May 26, 2012 Stevens arrived in Tripoli to replace Cretz as US Ambassador to Libya.

What was the State Department responsibility for the special mission compound? If its purpose was to provide diplomatic cover for the CIA, then what was the CIA responsibility? These are significant questions. But it is unlikely that such questions will be asked at the public Congressional oversight investigations because questions about the role of the CIA Annex in Benghazi have been declared to be a classified matter.

Though the NYT article, “U.S. Approved Weapons for Libya Rebels Fell into Jihadis’ Hands,” about the Benghazi affair doesn’t go into detail about what the CIA was doing in Benghazi, it raises a significant issue that is likely to be at the root of why there was an attack on both the special mission compound and the CIA Annex compound.(20) The NYT refers to the concern US government officials involved in the program raise about the problems created by the US government helping to provide weapons to insurgents fighting in Libya and Syria. According to the NYT, what these Islamic militants will do with these weapons worries high level US government national security officials.

While officially, the US government claims it is not providing weapons, the Times of London article about the shipment of weapons from Benghazi to Turkey, provides a striking example of how the US and Turkish governments, both overtly, and covertly, appear to be involved in collecting weapons in Libya and helping to ship them to be used against the Syrian government and people.(21)

The NYT claims that the US government has little control over where these weapons go and the harm they do when used in Libya, Syria, or other conflicts in the region. The NYT reports, “Concerns in Washington soon rose about the groups Qatar was supporting, officials said. A debate over what to do about the weapons shipments dominated at least one meeting of the so-called Deputies Committee, the interagency panel consisting of the second-ranking officials in major agencies involved in national security. ‘There was a lot of concern that Qatar weapons were going to Islamist groups,’ one official recalled.” (22)

These supposed ‘Qatar’ weapons, however, did not originate with Qatar alone. By way of an example, the NYT quotes one US weapons dealer who wanted to sell weapons to the insurgency in Libya during the war against Libya. The NYT describes how he applied to the State Department for a license. “He also sent an e-mail to J. Christopher Stevens, then the special representative to the Libyan rebel Alliance, ” reports the NYT. According to e-mails provided to the NYT by the arms dealer, Marc Turi, Stevens wrote back to Turi that he would “share Mr. Turi’s proposal with colleagues in Washington.” Eventually the weapons dealer was encouraged to communicate with contacts in Qatar.(23)

Such examples help to demonstrate both that there is concern among US government

officials in Washington about the US government arming militant Islamists, the very people the US government condemns as “terrorists” in other situations. Also though the weapons pipeline may have on the surface been made to appear unconnected to the US actually supplying the arms that are being distributed by Qatar or Saudi Arabia, in the case of Marc Turi, as one example, the weapons pipeline was arranged for by a license provided by the US government to ship the weapons to Qatar.

Such examples provide the context for how the US government has covertly and overtly been helping to provide the weapons that are then used by those hostile to the US to inflict harm on the Libyan and Syrian people and even on Americans, as those killed in Benghazi on September 11, 2012. This situation, several commentators have noted, is reminiscent to the Iran Contra Affair where the US government entities covertly acted in a way that jeopardized the interests and even the physical well being of US officials and civilians. And it is likely that the actions being taken by US government officials to arm and provide other forms of support for the Libyan and Syrian insurgencies, are contrary to US laws and constitutional obligations.(24)

Such considerations reflect some of the salient concerns raised by a number of online commentators about the Benghazi Affair. One example of many that have been published online in the last few months is the article “Benghazigate: The Cover-up continues” by Bill Shanefeld published at the American Thinker website. The article raises two important questions (25): “(1) The pre-“event” purpose of the compound and its Annex (since these operations probably motivated the perpetrators of the “event”); and (2) Team Obama’s failed policies in North Africa, the Middle East, and Afghanistan.”

The article also refers to some of the many contributions made by other online commentators. These various commentaries help to clarify that the Benghazi affair offers a relatively rare window into the on the ground actions of the US government’s clandestine operations. These actions are the partner to the role the US government is playing in the UN Security Council and the UN in general in its efforts to turn the UN into a partner in its CIA and NATO activities. The Benghazi Affair is an important situation and the question remains as to whether the illegal activities of the US government acting contrary to the obligations of the UN Charter in Libya and more recently Syria will come to light.

Notes

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10. The Oversight Committee’s letter was accompanied by 166 pages of documents and photos.

<http://oversight.house.gov/release/oversight-committee-asks-president-about-white-house-role-in-misguided-libya-normalization-effort/>

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11. U.S. State Department Public Accountability Board Report

<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/202446.pdf>

12. See for example, “Interview with Clare M. Lopez”

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13. Sheera Frenkel, “Syrian rebels squabble over weapons as biggest shipload arrives from Libya; Turkey,” Times (London), September 14, 2012, p. 23

14. Schedule of Chris Stevens activities on September 10 and September 14.

Included in data sent to President Obama by Issa and Chaffetz

15. Sheeran Frenkel, "Syrian rebels squabble over weapons as biggest shipload arrives from Libya; Turkey," Times (London), September 14, 2012, p. 23

16. "CIA chief Petraeus pays surprise visit to Turkey," Hurriyet Daily News, September 2, 2012

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