

US sends Marines to Libya after ambassador's killing

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The Obama administration has dispatched an elite unit of Marine special forces to Libya after the killing of the US ambassador and three other US personnel in the storming of the American consulate in Benghazi Tuesday.

The killing of Ambassador Christopher Stevens, the first such killing of a US envoy since the death of Washington's ambassador to Afghanistan in 1979, together with the breaching the walls of the US embassy in Cairo by Islamist demonstrators, touched off bitter political recriminations in Washington.

The Libyan attack is by all appearances a case of the chickens coming home to roost. Ambassador Stevens was himself very much involved in executing a policy that culminated in his own demise. The war for "regime change" that ended with the lynch-mob murder of former leader Muammar Gaddafi last October was prosecuted by means of US-NATO bombardment and the arming, training and financing of "rebels" that included Islamist elements closely connected to Al Qaeda. Now it appears that these same elements have killed Stevens.

While designed to install a puppet government subordinate to the interests of Washington and the Western oil companies and to teach China a lesson as to who runs North Africa, the war has produced what in the parlance of the intelligence services is known as blowback.

No doubt a contributing factor to Tuesday's bloody events is the fact that the US-NATO war has brought no benefit to masses of Libyans, who are increasingly embittered over the devastation of their country.

Both the incidents in Benghazi and Cairo, together with smaller demonstrations in Tunisia, Sudan, Morocco and the Gaza Strip, were ostensibly in response to a provocative, rabidly anti-Muslim film produced in the US. A trailer for the amateurish and cartoon-like video, titled "Innocence of Muslims," was posted on YouTube in July, and more recently was dubbed in Arabic and became more widely known after being denounced on an Egyptian television program.

Initially an individual describing himself as Sam Bacile, an Israeli-American real estate developer in California, claimed he had made the video to "expose" Islam. It later appeared, however, that no such person exists. Promoted by Christian right elements, the film appears to have been designed precisely to provoke violent confrontations.

The sequence of events in Benghazi remains somewhat murky. Initial reports attributed the attack to a militia known as the Ansar al-Sharia brigade, but the group has denied involvement.

Libya's deputy interior minister, Wanis al-Sharif, tried to pin the blame on supporters of Gaddafi, but also suggested that the Americans were responsible for their own fate for not heeding previous warnings of attacks by Al Qaeda. "It was necessary that they take precautions," he told AFP. "It was their fault that they did not take the necessary precautions."

The *New York Times* Wednesday cited US officials as suggesting that the death of Stevens was not merely the accidental byproduct of spontaneous protest. "Indications suggest the possibility that an organized group had either been waiting for an opportunity to exploit like the protests over the video or perhaps even generated the protests as a cover for their attack," the *Times* reported.

As many as 80 militiamen, armed with assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars and 14.5mm anti-aircraft machine guns took part in the assault, a Libyan reporter told the BBC.

Others have suggested that the attack, carried out on September 11, may have been the work of Al Qaeda-linked elements seeking revenge for the US drone assassination of Abu Yahya al-Libi, the Libyan-born Al Qaeda leader killed in June in North Waziristan, near the Afghan border.

Sharif said that two of the slain Americans died as US security forces flown in from the capital of Tripoli tried to evacuate US personnel from a safe house in Benghazi, where they had been taken during the attack on the consulate.

"It was supposed to be a secret place, and we were surprised the armed groups knew about it. There was shooting," Sharif told Reuters, suggesting that the attackers had good intelligence on US operations in the city.

Ambassador Stevens and another member of the US consular staff were killed in the attack on the consulate. Libyan authorities said that Stevens died of asphyxiation, apparently resulting from fires ignited by rocket-propelled grenades and homemade bombs. The consulate was left gutted and looted.

Speaking from the Rose Garden Wednesday morning, Obama emphasized that "the US is working with the Libyan government to bring the attackers to justice."

He did not spell out what form "justice" would take. The White House ordered 50 members of the elite Marine special forces unit known as a Fleet Antiterrorism Security Team (FAST) to Libya. This may be only the first elements of a larger US intervention. A senior administration official told reporters Wednesday, "The Department of Defense is ready to respond with additional military measures, as directed by the president."

The Pentagon is also redeploying US warships off the Libyan coast. The destroyer USS Laboon moved to a position off the Libyan coast Wednesday, while the USS McFaul is reportedly en route. Both ships carry Tomahawk missiles, which they could fire at targets on land.

Libyan officials also reported that US drones regularly fly over the North African country.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued her own statement Wednesday, expressing perplexity over the attack. "How could this happen in a country we helped liberate in a city we helped save from destruction?," she said. "This question reflects just how complicated, and at times how confounding the world can be."

Clinton could have answered her own question by spelling out the criminal and filthy methods that Washington employed to "liberate" Libya.

The loss of Stevens, a high-level US Middle East operative, was clearly a blow. Fluent in Arabic, he had served in various parts of the region in mid-level embassy positions, such as political section chief in Jerusalem, political officer in Damascus, consular/political officer in Cairo and consular/economic officer in Riyadh. Dispatched to Libya in 2007, he was first listed as "chargé d'Affaires" and then deputy chief of mission. Secret cables published by WikiLeaks show he held frequent meetings with Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, whom he once described as an "engaging and charming interlocutor."

Then in March of last year, barely a week before the US and NATO launched their war for regime change in Libya, Stevens was named US "liaison to the opposition" and dispatched with a US team to Benghazi. A State Department spokesman said he would "explore ways to open funding spigots for an opposition movement."

In this military intervention, Washington and its European, Saudi and Qatari allies provided arms, training and heavy air support for the so-called rebels, which included significant numbers of Islamist fighters, some of whom had worked with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan or Iraq. If the attack on the consulate was carried out by these elements, the US ambassador and the other Americans were likely killed with arms and ammunition supplied by NATO.

Islamist militias continue to wield substantial power in Libya after elections held in July. Libya's interim government is incapable of disarming the various armed groups or imposing its authority. In recent weeks heavily armed militiamen have brought in bulldozers to demolish shrines and mosques belonging to the Sufi branch of Islam in Tripoli, and other cities, sparking clashes that left several people dead and wounded.

Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney issued a statement late Tuesday night declaring his outrage over the attacks in Libya and Egypt and stating, "It's disgraceful that the Obama Administration's first response was not to condemn attacks on our diplomatic missions, but to sympathize with those who waged the attacks."

Romney was referring to a statement issued by the US Embassy in Egypt hours before thousands of demonstrators gathered outside, scaling its walls and hauling down the US flag, which was replaced with the black banner favored by Islamist groups. The statement, which condemned "efforts by misguided individuals to hurt the feelings of Muslims," aimed to pre-empt the protest. The embassy also reportedly called Egypt's Salafist Nour Party, relaying this message and asking them to call off the demonstration.

In an interview with CBS, Obama responded that Romney's criticism was indicative of a "tendency to shoot first and aim later."

Beneath the superficial political attacks, there are no doubt deeper concerns within the American ruling elite over the implications of a US policy of "regime change" carried out by

backing Islamist forces in both Libya and Syria, destabilizing the entire Middle East in the process.

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