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The Effects of Diplomacy as Subversion

The State Department's "Report" on the Attack in Benghazi

by MAXIMILIAN FORTE

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Almost immediately after the armed attack in Benghazi, Libya, on September 11, 2012, which resulted in the death of U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens, along with Sean Smith, Tyrone Woods, and Glen Doherty, added to the destruction and looting of the U.S. facility in Benghazi, various columnists immediately took to issuing pronouncements on what had happened in Libya and what it meant. They all sounded so certain. Yet, the only certainty has been the deliberate production of uncertainty, with multiple layers of obfuscation, questions asked and never answered, and some questions not even asked yet. This is largely the case even now, four months after the attack and with the December 18 release of [the findings of a State Department investigation](#) into the attack. The [report](#) was produced by the "Accountability Review Board" convened by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton herself, and is thus lacking the impartiality of an independent body without ties to the Obama administration or the vested interests of those in charge of the State Department. The investigation was led by Thomas R. Pickering (a former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador during the height of its dirty war against opposition movements and guerrillas tied to the FMLN), and Admiral Michael Mullen.

As someone with a background in ethnohistory and archival research of colonial documents, plus seeing that this report is "unclassified" and is thus being circulated to various media, it struck me that the intent of this release was to produce not answers to a problem, but rather the State Department's preferred version of events as the party to a conflict in Libya that the U.S. internationalized, widened and escalated since February 2011. There is actually little that is new

in the report that has not already been presented and debated and left unsettled in the public sphere. Indeed, the report itself ultimately reduces everything to a need for more security measures and better training. This report is a very stark contrast to what some journalists were promising us would be a “[State Department bombshell](#).” Well it’s a dud.

The Untold Story

Imagine this: a government that regularly executes alleged enemies abroad, using drone strikes based on supposed “intelligence,” that routinely claims to kill “terrorist” leaders and prevent “impending” attacks, is still not able—not even four months later—to identify the group responsible for the attack in Benghazi. Not able, or perhaps not willing. Instead, this report refers us to the FBI, which still has an investigation underway. This is [the same FBI that was too frightened to send agents to Benghazi](#) to investigate the attack, even weeks after the attack, and well after the “crime scene” had been extensively looted and “degraded.” Instead, this is the state of U.S. intelligence on Benghazi: “the key questions surrounding the identity, actions and motivations of the perpetrators remain to be determined by the ongoing criminal investigation” (p. 2). Even if we take the report at face value, this missing element—who are the attackers—should give anyone reason enough for lengthy pause. The U.S. government is claiming to not know which group attacked its staff in Benghazi, let alone the identities of the individual attackers. This says something about the state of U.S. “knowledge” of Libya. If we do not take the report at face value, then it reads like a deliberate attempt to cover up what the U.S. does not want the public to know.

In this regard, there are many possibilities, and no certainties. The report itself offers passing acknowledgment of the “continued presence of pro-Qaddafi supporters” (p. 15)—but does not even for a moment consider who might have [a motive to attack the U.S. facility](#) in Benghazi. The report does not even once mention the presence of CIA agents in its so-called “Special Mission Compound” in Benghazi, even though multiple reports surfaced that the attack had targeted a CIA base, exposing the presence of CIA personnel in significant numbers, and delivered [a huge blow](#) to CIA efforts in Libya—and to efforts to [illicitly send arms to Syrian rebels via Turkey](#). And what was the [CIA doing there](#)? Reportedly their work focused on “securing” weaponry looted from Libyan government arsenals during the NATO war, such as surface-to-air missiles, the SA-7’s. It was also reported that Ambassador Chris Stevens’ work in Benghazi involved the [transshipment of heavy weapons from Libya](#) and [into the hands of jihadists](#) fighting to overthrow the government of Syria. Is it just a coincidence then that Syrian rebels have [started using SA-7’s](#) that they never had before? A CIA operation such as this would thus not only be [violating international law](#), it would also reveal the lie that is Obama’s claim that the U.S. is not supplying Syrian rebels with weapons. This again widens the options concerning the motives of possible attackers, including those who might want to put a stop to such covert operations against Syria.

What is not clear is why “Islamists” in Libya would want to attack the Benghazi “mission.” After all, these would be some of the same people who benefitted from NATO’s air cover, for which they pleaded, and from Western weapons shipments during the war to overthrow the Libyan government, and who are reportedly benefitting again by being supported by the U.S. and its NATO partner, Turkey, in sending weapons to Syria, with some Libyans already active in that

war. How would they gain anything, and would they not lose a great deal in launching such an inexplicable attack against their own partners?

Unmentionable Friends

Indeed this is a major conceptual shortcoming of the report: how it abruptly converts “militias” into “terrorists” (see p. 4). For all of the report writers’ insistence that their job is not to identify the attackers, the report speaks of the activities and nature of Al Qaeda and its affiliates (p. 2). But then a question arises: if “Islamists” and “jihadists” are a problem, why does the U.S. work with them in Libya? Likewise, if they are as “anti-American” as is commonly assumed, why do some actively collaborate with the U.S.? How among what the report acknowledges is a dizzying array of militias, do U.S. officials determine which are the good “Islamists” and which are the bad ones? The report itself provides some interesting answers.

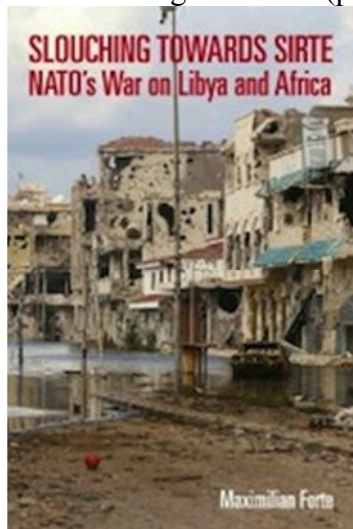
The authors of the report comment on how the U.S. backed war against the USSR in Afghanistan, and the U.S.’ subsequent invasion and occupation of Iraq, provided the networks, training, and experience that empowered the “jihadis” that Gaddafi fought, and that continue to destabilize Libya under U.S. auspices. Here there is not even a pause in the report when the former monarchy based in Benghazi, U.S. interests, and jihadists all cohabit the same paragraph, as if they were natural partners (p. 13). Indeed, the report casually notes that the “Special Mission’s Libyan security contingent was composed of four armed members of the February 17 Martyrs’ Brigade (February 17)—a local umbrella organization of militias dominant in Benghazi (some of which were Islamist)” (p. 19). Some of which were Islamist?

Then there is the assertion of the Libyans’ supposed love affair with Ambassador Stevens. If Stevens, and other foreign officials, had truly “earned the admiration of countless numbers of Libyans” (p. 14) as presented in the State Department’s hagiography, there should not have been a river of attacks (a list of 20 attacks is provided, pp. 15-16, for Benghazi alone) against U.S. and related Western targets, and Stevens should still be alive today. In this inability to get over themselves, the obsessive self-praise of U.S. officialdom, amounting to what often seems like an institutionalized narcissism and hubris, there is no discussion of why the reality of Libya is one where U.S. officials get killed. The report only offers a remarkably simplified picture of two kinds of potential Libyan opponents: protesters and terrorists.

The report, however, does note that a kind of tunnel vision developed among U.S. officials in Libya—perhaps blaming them for their own demise—a vision in which violence against the U.S. and other international targets was normalized and effectively pushed aside. The report comments on the possibility—at least this possibility earns their commentary—that with so many attacks against U.S. and international targets, it all came to be seen as normal: “the longer a post is exposed to continuing high levels of violence the more it comes to consider security incidents which might otherwise provoke a reaction as normal, thus raising the threshold for an incident to cause a reassessment of risk and mission continuation” (p. 16). On the other hand, the concept of “resistance” appears to be forbidden, precluded from discussion. Moreover, as I will discuss below, this line of argument holds no water and is part of a subtle subtext of the report that places the blame for Stevens’ death partly on Stevens himself.

Questionable Friends

It is odd, but not surprising, that the report offers the public no considerations of the risk that results as a blowback effect of U.S. destabilization, just as it erases any notion of resistance. Instead all the U.S. has is friends in Libya. So how did four Americans get killed? They were, we are told, guarded by a local militia, the February 17 militia. Unfortunately, “February 17 militia members had stopped accompanying Special Mission vehicle movements in protest over salary and working hours” (p. 5). Moreover, the investigators “found little evidence that



the armed February 17 guards offered any meaningful defense” of the “special mission” (p. 6). As for the Libyan government, the investigators found “the Libyan government’s response to be profoundly lacking on the night of the attacks, reflecting both weak capacity and near absence of central government influence and control in Benghazi” (pp. 6-7). That sounds like the Libyan “government,” such as it is, had no capacity to help—which is quite likely true. However, that does not explain why “an unknown individual in a Libyan Supreme Security Council (SSC) police uniform” was spotted on the day of the attack “apparently taking photos of the compound villas with a cell phone from the second floor of a building under construction across the street to the north” of the “special mission” (p. 19).

Rewriting History

The authors of this report seem compelled to provide the preferred rendition of Libyan history, consistently making remarks that are noteworthy for lacking almost any relevance at all to the nature and purpose of their report. At the same time, the report adds to recent official comments that go strikingly against the Obama narrative at the start of the war in 2011, as if these officials suffered from amnesia and forgot what was in the last set of talking points on the approved and authorized view of Libya.

For example, while Obama repeatedly insisted he was against regime change back in March of 2011, and that international intervention was needed to protect civilians, his sole concern, there is no attempt to maintain this illusion any longer. Thus the report, [like Secretary Clinton earlier](#), points out that Christopher Stevens was the U.S. “Special Envoy” to “the rebel-led government

that eventually toppled Muammar Qaddafi in fall 2011,” and that was even before the U.S. publicly recognized that “government” as the “sole, legitimate representative of the Libyan people.” Stevens and his “special mission,” worked to bolster “U.S. support for Libya’s democratic transition through engagement with eastern Libya, the birthplace of the revolt against Qaddafi and a regional power center” (p. 2). Put simply, this was a diplomat actively working to overthrow a foreign government. This was a “diplomat” whose work consisted of regime change—despite early official pronouncements to the contrary—and in addition one whose commitment to Libya was restricted to the eastern portion. Subverting a government was accompanied by pandering to regionalist sentiments that have worked to divide and destabilize Libya since the bloody coup against Gaddafi.

If anything, the report seems to suggest that “diplomacy as subversion” is the State Department’s favored model for international engagement, noting: “significantly increased demands on U.S. diplomats to be present in the world’s most dangerous places to advance American interests and connect with populations beyond capitals, and beyond host governments’ reach” (p. 2). “Beyond host governments’ reach” is a pleasant way of saying that U.S. diplomats advance U.S. interests by circumventing the same legally constituted national authorities that the U.S. officially recognizes because it requires their prior permission to even establish an embassy. However, this model does not necessarily rely on establishing formal embassies, a formality that can be dispensed with in the new American diplomacy. This is the case even with Libya today, after Gaddafi—the so-called “consulate” in Benghazi, as some media called it, “was never a consulate,” and the report states that its presence was “never formally notified to the Libyan government”—the current government (pp. 14-15). Elsewhere the report speaks of the “special mission” as having a “non-status” as a “temporary, residential facility” (p. 5). One wonders how the Libyan government was supposed to come to the rescue of an entity that remained a mystery.

With reference to at least unofficially legitimizing Libyan regionalism, which reaches the point of organized secessionism in eastern Libya, the report acknowledges that “Stevens’ presence in the city [Benghazi] was seen as a significant sign of U.S. support for the TNC and a recognition of the resurgence of eastern Libya’s political influence” (p. 13). The report then validates without any question the Benghazi narrative that, “throughout Qaddafi’s decades-long rule, eastern Libya consistently lagged behind Tripoli in terms of infrastructure and standard of living even as it was responsible for the vast majority of Libya’s oil production” (p. 13). (Perhaps the U.S. should consider moving its capital to Texas.) What the report does not consider is that under Gaddafi other historically much more neglected areas—those that were not the privileged seat of the old monarchy—finally began to receive attention, and this bothered some in Benghazi who then (as now) continue to demand nearly exclusive attention to their own interests.

There are many other examples of the rewriting of history to better accord with U.S. interests and designs, but none is more glaring than the complete absence of any mention of U.S. and NATO bombings over eight months and the presence of U.S. and British special forces on the ground, along with hundreds of Qatari troops. The war against Libya never happened. Instead we get a pretty portrait of valiant rebels single-handedly defeating Gaddafi, for example: “The TNC continued attacking the remaining Qaddafi strongholds, and Tripoli fell earlier than expected at the end of August” (p. 14). Indeed, Libya had been visited by “a popular uprising” (p. 13), one so popular that it required U.S. intervention because it had no chances of success otherwise. There

is a reminder also that the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli shut down merely days after the first street protests began—a curiously rapid decision (p. 13).

“Oh for the love of Chris!”

The production of this report, and its intended public consumption, is part of what might be kindly called the U.S. government’s “public diplomacy” effort, or in more disquieting terms, strategic information operations. The report is largely an exercise in impression management. The result is [hagiography](#). Ambassador Stevens, we are told, “personified the U.S. commitment to a free and democratic Libya” (p. 2). The Americans who were killed possessed “selfless courage” (p. 3), and their duties were also “performed with courage” (p. 7). Lest ye forget, the report writers recommend that government agencies take yet another opportunity “to recognize their exceptional valor and performance, which epitomized the highest ideals of government service” (p. 12). Christopher Stevens was loved, as reflected by “his ability to move in all sectors of the population” (p. 2)—*all sectors*. Indeed, then he must still be moving. Often the report reads like a self-aggrandizing lobbying effort, self-conscious of its role as a means of marketing State Department goals in a time of reduced budgets, and often seems as if it had been penned directly by Secretary Clinton herself.

What is odd is that at times the report seems to almost blame Stevens for his own death: “Embassy Tripoli did not demonstrate strong and sustained advocacy with Washington for increased security for Special Mission Benghazi” (p. 4). This is despite publicly available evidence to the contrary, with a number of [emails](#) from Stevens that have been [published](#), showing that Stevens had issued “[multiple warnings](#)” of security threats. The report nevertheless seems to find fault with him—“but you did not *persuade* me” you can almost hear them say. And yet, elsewhere the report states that Washington gave “unusual deference to his judgments” (p. 6)—so there is a bit of a contradiction that remains unresolved.

As part of the fog of diplomacy, what remains occluded by this report is the real story of “Benghazi Gate.” That Obama may have been keen to cover up any role of Al Qaeda, which he had loudly proclaimed to be decimated and left adrift after the execution of Bin Laden, is possible. His limited symbolic capital going into the last elections, which he barely won, could not stand to be tarnished. What seems more compelling, occurring precisely at the time when Syria is being targeted by the U.S. and its allies, is the role of Libya as a proxy in a covert war against Syria. This is, after all, an administration that is almost neurotic when it comes to maintaining secrecy (except for when leaks serve the greater glory of the leader’s reputation). In a report that does not even conceive of a Libyan resistance, in the midst of so many dubious friends with agendas that may sometimes overlap with those of the U.S. (and others times, not), one cannot expect to find a sober and rational engagement with the realities of a Libya dismantled by U.S. intervention. That would be like accepting blame, and the report is driven by the need to (re)gain credit, at the expense of continuing to sow misinformation and confusion.