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Embassies under Assault

By Greg Aftandilian, Ryan Evans, and Gary Noel

Last week, a series of violent protests erupted at Western, mostly American, diplomatic compounds. It began when the U.S. Consulate in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi and the U.S. Embassy in Cairo were surrounded by protesters. They claimed to be angry over an anti-Islamic film “Innocence of Muslims” directed by a mysterious businessman with a criminal record. The wave of violent protests that erupted across the Muslim world has taken the lives of four Americans – including the U.S. Ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, killed on September 11 in Benghazi. Hundreds of protestors stormed the grounds of the U.S. Embassy in Sana, Yemen. Thousands of protestors gathered in Cairo’s Tahrir Square, the preeminent symbol of the 2011 Arab Uprisings, where they chanted anti-American slogans. The U.S. Embassy in Tunis was set ablaze. Protests also erupted throughout Pakistan and in Kabul, Afghanistan.

In Benghazi armed fired their weapons and tried to burn the Consulate down. A Libyan Interior Ministry official in Benghazi, [revealed](#) that the Libyan security forces charged with guarding the Consulate were complicit in the attack. One of the Benghazi victims, Foreign Service Information Management Officer Sean Smith, [said in an online message](#), “We saw one of our ‘police’ that guard the compound taking pictures.” There is some confusion as to whether Ambassador Stevens was killed in the Consulate from smoke inhalation or by a rocket-propelled grenade attack on the vehicle evacuating him from the compound. The Omar Abdul Rahman Brigade, a Libyan jihadist group, [is likely responsible](#) for the attack.

The tragic irony of Benghazi, as the scene of this attack, has not been lost on many observers. If not for the NATO operation in Libya last year, Benghazi - the epicenter of the Libyan revolt against Ghaddafi – would have been viciously brought to heel.

In Cairo, Islamists and soccer hooligans known as “Ultras” climbed the walls of the Embassy compound, took down and burned the American flag and raised an Islamic banner in its place. Several news agencies reported



that American security forces fired shots into the air while the Egyptian police were hesitant to respond. The Embassy in Cairo initially had released a statement calling for the responsible exercise of free speech so as not to insult religious beliefs. As of September 17, Cairo seems to have calmed down, but protests are still ongoing in Pakistan and elsewhere.

U.S. Policy Options

In every country where protestors have been able to threaten the physical security of U.S. diplomatic compounds, U.S. government representatives must remind host nation leaders of their responsibilities for embassy security and make it clear that if such assaults continue or recur, the U.S. may close all consulates, stop issuing visas, and suspend aid activities. The U.S. should also press vigorously for the arrest of those responsible for violent attacks – particularly in those countries where incitement to violence is a criminal offense.

The Obama Administration has rightly condemned these attacks. More assertive public steps are required. There are precedents that the President should keep in mind: the November 1979 storming of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran by “students” was precipitated by a smaller incursion into Embassy grounds in February of that year. The response to that initial incursion from the Carter Administration was muted.

It is also unlikely that the day of these demonstrations – 9/11 – was a coincidence. The video that the protestors claimed to be enraged by was posted to YouTube in July. And while the Libyan government quickly condemned the attack in Benghazi, Egyptian President Morsi, a leading figure in the Muslim Brotherhood movement, initially only offered a mild rebuke of the storming of the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, while the Brotherhood organization called for a second day of protests. Only after President Obama telephoned Morsi and vented his frustration in a television interview, saying he “would not consider Egypt an ally...” did Morsi change his tune. On September 13, Morsi, appearing at the European Commission in Brussels, stated that “we don’t accept, condone, or approve at all for there to be attacks on embassies, consulates, or people, killing in any way,” adding that he was cooperating with “the U.S. administration to prevent such attacks in the future.” However, the Brotherhood continued to issue statements calling for protests in its Arabic-language Twitter feed.

The United States must clearly underscore to Morsi and the rest of the Egyptian government that U.S. foreign aid and support is contingent upon Egypt protecting U.S. diplomatic property and personnel. Later this month, Morsi is coming to New York and Washington for meetings at the UN and with President Obama. Prior to the violence, the Obama administration said it was in favor of forgiving \$1 billion of Egypt’s debt. Meanwhile, Egypt has been negotiating a \$4.8 loan from the IMF—which the United States can influence.

President Obama should tell Morsi that unless U.S. diplomatic staff and property are protected in Egypt, such assistance will be called into question in the short term and will be unsustainable in the long term. If these negotiations do not go well for Morsi and he allows

relations with the U.S. to sour, his mandate may well be under renewed threat from the Egyptian Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). This is also an opportunity for the U.S. to push for guarantees for political freedoms in Egypt's new constitution, as Morsi has a great deal of control over the shape of the document. Egypt needs America at least as much as America needs Egypt.

Who killed the Ambassador?

[According to Noman Benotman](#), a former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), who was in touch with local sources, "the attack against the consulate had two waves. The first attack led to U.S. officials being evacuated from the consulate by Libyan security forces, only for the second wave to be launched against U.S. officials after they were kept in a secure location."

There are a number of militant groups best described as Salafi-Jihadist. This means they seek to practice Islam as practiced by Mohammad and his Companions, realize a society on this basis, and believe violence is permitted to advance this agenda. There are multiple groups in Eastern Libya that call themselves Ansar al Sharia, one of which is based in Benghazi.

This Benghazi-based group, led by Mohammad Zahawi, appears to have a propaganda arm, a civic action front, and a militia. Ansar al Sharia shies away from official calls for attacks on the West or Western targets. They seem to value their independence and they focus largely on Libyan issues. The Ansar al Shariah in Benghazi has never claimed an attack – to include this one, contrary to what has been reported in the press. Ansar al Shariah *has* endorsed the Benghazi attack and admitted their members may have been present at the Consulate, but they claim these men were not acting under orders. This fits their known *modus operandi* from previous attacks, such as the storming of the Tunisian Consulate in Benghazi in June. In early June, Ansar al Shariah coordinated a rally in Benghazi to demand the implementation of Islamic law in Libya. Attended by jihadi militias from across Libya, the rally was meant a show of force. Members were instructed to bring and display their weapons in a public square.

The Brigades of the Imprisoned Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, another Salafi-Jihadi group based around Benghazi, is a more likely suspect. They have claimed previous attacks in Benghazi – including one on the local Red Cross office (May 22), one on the U.S. Consulate (June 5), and a June 11 attack on the British Ambassador.

The North African Political Context

These attacks will also be troubling for the recently elected General National Congress in Libya, who is in the process of electing a new Prime Minister. The Libyan government understands the need to revamp an inept security force, disarm the population (weapons were widely distributed during the rebellion), and revamp the country's degraded oil industry. This attack will only serve to heighten that awareness.

The situation in Tunisia is perhaps the most troubling. There are rumors that Tunisian security forces told the protestors that as long as they didn't harm Tunisian soldiers, they could do whatever they wanted. The ruling Ennahdha party is rooted in the Muslim Brotherhood movement. Conventional wisdom has held, however, that Ennahdha is genuinely moderate and committed to democracy – at least more so than the Egyptian Brotherhood. But ties between Ennahdha and the leaders of the group responsible for the Tunis embassy attack raise serious questions about Ennahdha's moderation.

The [group behind the attack](#) is allegedly Ansar al Shariah, the same group responsible for past assaults on Tunisian secularists.¹ It is led by Sayf Allah bin Hussayn , AKA Abu Ayyad al-Tunisi, a former member of Ennahdha's defunct militant wing, the Tunisian Islamic Front. Abu Ayyad went on to start the Tunisian Combatant Group in Afghanistan and is most famous for arranging the assassination of the Afghan mujahideen commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud in September 2001. In 2003, he was arrested in Turkey and extradited to Tunisia. He stood trial and was sentenced to prison, but his sentence was cut short by the amnesty granted to political prisoners after the ouster of Ben Ali. The group has at least the [tacit support](#) of some senior Ennahdha figures, including Sadok Chourou and even Rachid Ghannouchi, who has appeared in photographs with his old comrade, Abu Ayyad. Abu Ayyad is said to have been present at the Tunis embassy attack. The group only called for peaceful protests, but may have been behind the violence. Authorities went to his home to arrest him, but he had already fled. It is encouraging, however, that Tunisian authorities are now acting decisively.

Egyptian President Morsi has been trying to play to several audiences since he was sworn in as president on June 30. Up until now, it has mostly worked, but this recent episode has shown that he can be too clever by half. On the one hand, he wants to portray himself as a moderate - a leader of all Egyptians regardless of religion, and a player on the world stage who can stand up to his Iranian hosts in Tehran during the Non-Aligned Movement summit and sharply criticize the Assad regime in Syria—Iran's principal ally in the Arab world. On the other hand, with Egyptian parliamentary elections slated for later in the year or early next year, Morsi wants to play to his Islamist base—both the Brotherhood and the more fundamentalist Salafi parties.² Hence, he is tempted to side with angry street protestors on supposedly religious grounds because that is his natural constituency. However, if he wants to get the Egyptian economy back on its feet and keep the Egyptian military from staging a coup against him, he needs to cultivate good relations with Washington. Morsi initially handled this incident poorly but his more recent statements suggest that he now apparently understands that if he wants Egypt's relations with Washington to be a success, he needs to act more as a responsible international statesman. Other Muslim Brotherhood officials were also late in acting responsibly. The movement leadership has only recently said – in both Arabic and English – that demonstrators should not attack embassies.

¹ Ansar al Shariah is now a common name for various militant Salafi groups in Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere. They are not part of the same group, although this particular Tunisian group has a more transnational history than most.

² The Brotherhood and Salafi parties converge on anti-Westernism and they compete for the conservative Muslim vote in Egypt. This creates incentives for taking extreme positions to “out do” their competitors.

The U.S. must pay attention to the Brotherhood's decision-making process and understand that it may not be led by Morsi. Khairat Al Shater, the Brotherhood's original candidate for the presidency who was disqualified, got out in front of Morsi and apologized to the U.S. in the *New York Times* op-ed section, but this may say more about how the Brotherhood functions than policy positions vis-à-vis America.³

Given that much of the rank-and-file of the Brotherhood and the Salafi movement are vociferously anti-Western, Morsi and other Brotherhood leaders need to stymie their tendency towards anti-Western agitation. They must do much more to say that an offensive anti-Islamic film is not the policy of the United States, that street violence will hurt Egypt's ability to attract foreign investment and bring badly-needed jobs to the country, and that the United States Government is trying to help Egypt economically. Otherwise, similar incidents are likely to erupt in the future, damaging not only U.S.-Egyptian relations but Egypt's ability to move out of economic stagnation.

³ See Al Shater's 2011 speech entitled "[The Nahda Project.](#)"