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Diplomatic Security Failure in Benghazi, Libya, September 11, 2012

Abstract: Terrorists attacked the United States diplomatic compound and adjoining CIA Annex in Benghazi, Libya, on September 11, 2012. Despite repeated warnings from officials about the security risks in Tripoli and Benghazi, we argue that intelligence, security, and organizational deficiencies within the Department of State created vulnerabilities contributing to the deaths of four Americans, including Ambassador Christopher Stephens. Scholarly assessment of these failures has been precluded as a consequence of the incident's use in partisan attacks. Republicans in Congress used investigations into the incident to damage presumed 2016 Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Rodham Clinton, who was then President Obama's secretary of state. Setting aside political considerations and examining the failures that led to the attack is important to protect diplomatic personnel abroad in the future.

Keywords: terrorism, diplomatic security, State Department, Benghazi, Libya

In contemporary American politics, the word “Benghazi” has become associated with failure and is now a politicized term. On September 11, 2012, four Americans, including security personnel and the United States Ambassador to Libya, died during a preventable terrorist attack on the diplomatic compound and adjacent Central Intelligence Agency Annex in Benghazi, Libya. Requests by US Ambassador Christopher Stevens for additional security due to suspicion that a nefarious act was likely to occur were ignored, despite US personnel stationed in Benghazi being put on high alert. Attacks by armed militias and Islamic extremist groups were befalling Western envoys throughout Northern Africa for several months prior to the attack on the Benghazi diplomatic compound. Given the instability in Libya—Dictator Muammar Qaddafi was overthrown in the fall of 2011 as part of the wider Arab Spring movement—

there was enough evidence that American diplomatic personnel would be targeted.

Why were the terrorist attacks in Benghazi on September 11, 2012, not prevented given the increased risks in Libya known to the United States government? We argue the attacks on the US diplomatic compound occurred due to failure in three different areas. First, the United States intelligence community failed to correctly identify the radical Islamic terrorist group Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL) operating inside Benghazi, the second-largest city in the North African country, which would later claim responsibility for the attacks. Second, failure by the US State Department to provide adequate security for the American personnel operating in Benghazi at the time made both the operators and the facilities where they were working vulnerable to attack. Finally, there were failures at the organizational level within the State Department, where dissemination of valuable intelligence was not shared within the hierarchical structure, leading to unnecessary vulnerabilities for the employees stationed in Benghazi, Libya at the time.

This research sets aside partisan biases to critically analyze the mismanagement of a cabinet-level department and its downstream implications. The Diplomatic Security Service (DS) and parts of the intelligence community (IC) reside within the US Department of State, where the failures from the top of the hierarchy were passed down to the supporting bureaus. Some of what occurred is vaguely familiar to the American public because members of the Republican Party used the incident to discredit presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Rodham Clinton, who served as secretary of state at the time, in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election.¹ After numerous hearings within the House of Representatives, the attack on the diplomatic compound in Benghazi became politicized. Due to this, it may be challenging to ascertain the causal forces that led to the intelligence failures anterior to the attack. Although the terrorists in Benghazi themselves are responsible for the assault on the compound and deaths of Americans there, former Secretary of State Clinton subsequently accepted some culpability for the attacks as head of the department.

First, the security failures at the diplomatic compound are analyzed. We then review the literature regarding intelligence gathering and analysis inside the IC and discuss failures with the process that led to a successful attack on the night of September 11, 2012. From there we identify the failure to provide adequate security for the personnel working at the compound and the operational failures that occurred at the organizational level within the US State Department. We conclude by offering suggestions on how to mitigate

similar vulnerabilities in the future as well as organizational best practices to aid in the promulgation of information across large departments, such as the State Department.

By 2011, the Arab Spring stretched to Libya as its people called for the removal of leader Muammar Qaddafi. Protests against several Arab nation leaders led to sectarian violence across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), most notably in Syria, Tunisia, and Libya. After the attacks, then Secretary of State Clinton assembled the Accountability Review Board (ARB). This was an investigative panel that issued a US government assessment reporting that post-Qaddafi Libya was unable to provide security or stability for its citizens.² Training and development programs that could strengthen the security forces, especially at lower levels, were nonexistent, as were systems for budgeting and other critical strategies.³ Libya's resources and security infrastructure were severely compromised after the removal of the authoritarian regime. Even Libya's substantial oil wealth was not enough to provide armed services or overcome the disarray of its state institutions.⁴ The growth of militias and other groups looking to seize control of the country made reliable security a virtual impossibility.

Because no cohesive opposition group emerged from the civil war, the National Transitional Council (NTC) had to contend with multiple armed factions and had difficulty unifying the country.⁵ The NTC was installed as a temporary measure until a permanent government could be elected. This lack of a stable, centralized government allowed militias and extremist groups to battle for control of the state. Although a majority of protests were nonviolent, the ARB demonstrated the security concerns that American diplomats faced in Benghazi and elsewhere in Libya.⁶ The report found discontinuity in the understanding and anticipation of terrorist activity at or near the Special Mission compound in Benghazi stating, "known gaps existed in the intelligence community's understanding of extremist militias in Libya and the potential threat they posed to U.S. interests, although some threats were known to exist."⁷ The IC focused on tying some of these Islamic extremist groups to al-Qaeda.⁸ However, the State Department was too myopic in its search for al-Qaeda affiliates at the time and overlooked the previously mentioned extremist group ASL, which had no direct ties to al-Qaeda.

With Libya destabilized, violent crime was on the rise, and some citizens expressed their frustrations by bombarding foreign diplomatic buildings and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).⁹ With the threat level rising due to post-Qaddafi national instability, requests for increased security were made to the State Department by the US diplomatic envoy to support the ambassador

and his staff stationed in Benghazi. However, nothing was done to supplement existing security at the compound. Surveillance cameras were ordered during the summer of 2012 but remained uninstalled because the necessary technical team had not been sent by State.¹⁰ As a result, the American diplomatic compound in Benghazi and adjoining CIA Annex site less than a mile down the road were raided and set on fire by nearly 100 Islamic extremists, and three American security personnel, in addition to United States Ambassador Christopher Stevens, were killed.

Prior to the Benghazi raid, there were significant terrorist-style attacks targeting foreign principals. Car bombings and guerilla strikes on government buildings were occurring throughout the capital city of Tripoli. In Benghazi, the British Ambassador narrowly escaped death in June 2012 when a rocket-propelled grenade fired at his car failed to detonate.¹¹ In the months leading up to the Benghazi attacks, intelligence reports revealed over a dozen small-arms attacks against diplomatic buildings, foreign diplomats, and NGOs, demonstrating the danger in the city stemming from instability. Research by Van Dyke describes the intensity of these attacks, where the perpetrators used improvised incendiary devices, rocket-propelled grenades, and hand grenades. They assaulted vehicles and structures including the US diplomatic compound and the Red Cross while also targeting individuals such as the British Ambassador and United States military personnel.¹² The amount and severity of chaos unfolding in Benghazi at the time illustrates the need for increased security measures. The NTC was having a difficult time maintaining the safety of Libya as a whole, so they could not be expected to maintain order on a city-by-city basis.

With Libya's security in transition, several groups were vying for control of Benghazi, the country's second-largest city with a population of over 600,000 residents. The most notable was ASL, founded by Muhammad al-Zahawi in February 2012.¹³ The ASL was a product of two prominent groups: Ansar al-Sharia Brigade in Benghazi (ASB) and Ansar al-Sharia in Derna (ASD).¹⁴ Although not affiliated with al-Qaeda, ASL's primary goal was to establish an Islamic state in Libya via violent jihad by declaring the United States' "war on terror" as a war against all Muslims.¹⁵

Both the United States Temporary Mission Facility (TMF) diplomatic compound and the secret CIA Annex were located in Benghazi. The total number of employees at these facilities is difficult to assess, but there were approximately 32 Americans evacuated from the CIA Annex on the morning of September 12.¹⁶ The temporary mission created by the Department of State moved, based on security concerns, to the compound referred to as the TMF.¹⁷

The CIA Annex was a separate, classified installation located nearby that housed a small six-person quick-reaction security force comprised of mainly contractors and ex-military personnel.¹⁸

A DS team was deployed to Benghazi in 2011 to protect State Department personnel on the ground in Libya and establish a diplomatic presence after the United States Embassy in Tripoli had closed due to deteriorating security.¹⁹ The DS's responsibilities included emergency planning and coordination, supervising security teams, employing counterterrorism strategies, conducting threat assessments, and advising the chief of mission (usually the ambassador) on security matters. Both the TMF and the CIA Annex had minimal security, so locals in Benghazi would not be alerted to the American presence. The ARB concluded that the TMF and CIA Annex, respectively, "was never a consulate and [their existence was] never formally notified to the Libyan government," leading to the use of undersized security forces and the ultimate vulnerability of the two sites.²⁰

At the time, overseas embassies were to be constructed with fewer walls and employ more relaxed screening procedures in an effort not to draw attention to the structures or be viewed by the locals as "fortress America."²¹ In 2001, the State Department initiated a Standard Embassy Design (SED) to bring US diplomatic facilities around the world into compliance with State Department security standards.²² By 2010, the SED concept was scrapped in favor of the State Department's desire to build new embassies using indigenous structures in order to blend into the local fabric and appear more welcoming.²³ The fact that the United States had a diplomatic compound that was built to be "friendly" and a clandestine CIA site that could not be adequately protected while maintaining secrecy made those facilities soft targets for anyone who wanted to penetrate them.

Among those attending the ongoing Libyan Arab Spring protests in 2012 were peaceful demonstrators, militia members, and known terrorist groups. Given the violent conditions stemming from other protests throughout the region, there was a clear and present security threat against US interests in Benghazi, although no specific threat of attack on the Special Mission had been cited by US intelligence.²⁴ The ARB found that US intelligence provided no immediate, specific warning of the attack because the protests were "unanticipated in scale and intensity."²⁵ Interestingly, in the months before the attacks on September 11, 2012, the IC provided ample strategic warning that the security situation in eastern Libya was deteriorating and that US facilities and personnel were at risk in Benghazi.²⁶ The incongruence of this information is alarming. The ARB suggests that there was no "immediate, specific" warning

of an attack, and yet the IC issued several warnings saying the facilities and personnel were “at risk.”²⁷ The State Department had determined the threat level in the area was high, meaning there was serious potential damage to American diplomats. Although the high threat level gave the State Department enough evidence to justify deterrence by assigning a larger security presence, it neglected to do so.

Despite repeated warnings that US personnel in Benghazi were at risk of an attack, there was no specific intelligence that merited an immediate increase in the security presence. In September 2012, there were three State Department DS agents, along with a small number of civilians assigned to the TMF in Benghazi, and there were nine security personnel and an unknown (classified) number of other individuals at the CIA Annex. On the night of the attack, there were five DS agents present at the TMF, so it had a much weaker security posture than did the Annex.²⁸

At approximately 9:40 p.m. Benghazi time (3:40 p.m. Eastern), on September 11, 2012, dozens of attackers scaled the front gate and then opened it once inside, allowing for at least 60 more to enter the compound.²⁹ Minutes after the gate breach, six CIA personnel stationed at the nearby Annex were alerted and responded. In addition to the five DS agents on duty, there were three armed members of the Libyan February 17 Brigade militia, three Libyan National Police officers, and five unarmed members of a local security team who were guarding the TMF that night.³⁰ The CIA security team was observed departing the Annex at 10:03 p.m., arriving at the TMF approximately seven minutes later. Amid the smoke and fire given off by diesel fuel the attackers poured into the compound, a DS agent took Ambassador Stevens and State Department Information Management Officer Sean Smith into the “safe area” (fortified interior panic room) of the main building of the TMF.³¹ When the safe area was overtaken by smoke, the DS agent was able to crawl out a window but became separated from Ambassador Stevens and Officer Smith, neither of whom survived the attack.

Upon evacuating the TMF at 11:30 p.m., the armored vehicles carrying US and allied Libyan militia personnel encountered heavy small-arms fire from the attackers but were able to return to the CIA Annex safely. At approximately 11:56 p.m. local time, sporadic small-arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades were launched at the Annex.³² The site would continue to take fire in multiple waves throughout the evening. At approximately 5:00 a.m., a seven-person security team from Tripoli arrived moments before mortar rounds began hitting the Annex during a third and final wave of the attack.³³ Two security officers stationed at the Annex, Tyrone Woods and

Glen Doherty, were killed when they took direct mortar fire as they engaged the enemy from the roof of the Annex.³⁴ Less than an hour later, a heavily armed Libyan militia unit arrived to help evacuate the Annex of all US personnel to the airport. The ambassador's body, which had been secured by a local Libyan coordinating with the State Department, was transported from the Benghazi Medical Center to the airport, along with the bodies of the three other deceased personnel.³⁵ All told, the incident lasted just over 12 hours and left four Americans dead.

The failures leading up to the Benghazi attacks are numerous and primarily rest with the State Department. Early on, frequent warnings and evidence provided by the IC of extremist groups participating in the Arab Spring protests were largely ignored. The post-Qaddafi destabilization of Libya and the increase in attacks against foreign dignitaries and NGOs made Benghazi a dangerous city. Despite these risks, the additional security cameras ordered for the TMF were never installed, and as previously mentioned, responsibility for installation resided with the State Department. The State Department also decided to scrap the SED initiative in order to make diplomatic buildings appear less intimidating so that locals would not feel like they were living in a foreign garrison state. The American presence in Benghazi also consisted of a secret CIA Annex that was not disclosed to the host nation, and security was kept to a minimum to maintain the Annex's veil of anonymity. Last, the State Department declined to provide extra security despite receiving at least three cables from Ambassador Stevens requesting additional security personnel and the possibility of combining the TMF and CIA Annex into one site.³⁶ Security decisions were being made in Washington, DC, by officials too far away from the situation using a "playbook" that had no contingency for an installation like the TMF or the CIA Annex in Benghazi. What follows is an analysis of the failures leading up to the attack on the diplomatic compound according to three factors: intelligence, security, and organization.

A nation's intelligence agencies are responsible for limiting vulnerabilities and effecting policy directives that will mitigate threats and upgrade its citizens' security. Gentry states that intelligence-related failures lead to gaps and vulnerabilities if a state does not adequately collect intelligence information, make sound policy based on the intelligence, and effectively act.³⁷ For example, failures in collecting and synthesizing credible intelligence contributed to the severity of the raid led by the Islamic extremist group ASL on the US diplomatic compound in Benghazi. In Gentry's estimation, the attack represents a failure by the IC to heed threat and opportunity warnings as well as failure to identify and ameliorate the compound's vulnerabilities.

Additionally, this susceptibility was exacerbated by a lack of cooperation and communication between foreign and domestic ICs and within domestic IC organizations—namely, the State Department and CIA.³⁸

The purpose of any intelligence agency is to collect, coordinate, and process information to detect and thereby mitigate threats.³⁹ Security initiatives also rely on several risk assessment and mitigation factors, including threat, criticality, and vulnerability assessments. Threat assessment examines what an adversary can accomplish and the degree of lethality. A criticality assessment evaluates not only the physical consequences but also the economic and psychological effects of an adversary achieving that goal. Carafano argues that a vulnerability assessment examines weaknesses in physical structures, systems, or processes and ways to mitigate or eliminate them, demonstrated by the United States, where at least 53 Islamist-inspired terrorist attacks since September 11 have been thwarted before they could be executed.⁴⁰

Because intelligence itself is shrouded in secrecy, sometimes it is impossible to predict the motives or actions of an adversary.⁴¹ Intelligence assessments of the situation in Libya in the early 2010s did not consider that, rather than simply being a transnational terrorist network, al-Qaeda should be thought of as one component of a larger global Islamist insurgency.⁴² More than a dozen attacks were noted by Western diplomatic envoys in Benghazi prior to the attack on the United States diplomatic compound.⁴³ The imminent threat to foreign institutions in Libya was not seen as credible by the US State Department. The undervaluing of intelligence regarding the existence of known terrorist groups like ASL and the intensifying instability in the region was therefore a miscalculation.

In Benghazi, there was no specific warning about the attack despite the fact CIA officers met with sources and collected information about terrorist plans and intentions in the city.⁴⁴ Intelligence failures often occur due to information overload.⁴⁵ An abundance of information makes the separation of critical intelligence difficult. “Noise,” or the sea of unimportant information and false warnings in intelligence, is a function of both the superfluous amount of intelligence gathered and the difficulty of sorting and sharing that intelligence.⁴⁶ Not all information collected is credible; it can be vague, misleading, or incorrect. Once an organization decides what intelligence is credible, it must then notify other departments and their heads to act. The difficulty of sorting through noise suppressed the response to the crucial signals that were available prior to the attack.⁴⁷ As discussed below, the organization of the IC contributed to the signal-to-noise problem.

Human intelligence (HUMINT) involves sending personnel to foreign countries to gather information, requiring a great deal of time and resources to gain assets and analyze information, rendering it one of the most difficult types of intelligence to produce and implement.⁴⁸ Quality HUMINT allows analysts that may not be stationed in a particular country to make calculated decisions. However, officers on the ground can provide valuable assessments based on their expertise and proximity to a given situation. Effective intelligence officers need to spend months, or even years, in a country to assimilate and develop trustworthy assets that will provide usable intelligence. Officers with diplomatic cover can contact foreign government employees and develop them as sources of information.⁴⁹ Margolis noted that the United States' focus on technical methods of intelligence gathering made some operations susceptible to counterintelligence when areas of HUMINT were not addressed.⁵⁰ Counterintelligence is the analytical and operational process of identifying and neutralizing foreign intelligence activities.⁵¹ Overreliance on technical intelligence and a lack of attention to relevant HUMINT on the ground were catalysts for the success of the attacks in Benghazi because the threat assessment of the groups participating in the protests outside the diplomatic compound was inaccurate. Even though the United States had intelligence officers in country for months prior to the attacks, their assessments and local knowledge of the potential volatility of demonstrators went largely ignored by State Department officials.⁵²

Desire for a positive mission may have taken precedence over security concerns at the time, despite the fact that other countries were abandoning their principal missions in Libya and smaller attacks were increasing.⁵³ There was a clear perception that the benefits of maintaining a mission in Benghazi outweighed the risks associated with the threatening environment.⁵⁴ Despite warnings from within the IC, there were no efforts made by decision makers within State to increase security or close the US diplomatic compound prior to the attack in September 2012. The Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs released a report in December 2012, after investigating the attacks on the Benghazi diplomatic compound, and found several security failures, some of which were physical (structural), whereas others resulted from human error. Despite security concerns, officials inside the State Department were convinced that the United States ought to have a presence outside of Tripoli so as to emphasize its interest in the eastern part of Libya.⁵⁵ Leaders inside the State Department failed to accurately assess and address the dangers of leaving a mission in Benghazi.

Along with the American security failures in Benghazi, local security forces foundered as well. From 1969 to 2011, under Qaddafi's rule, US–Libyan relations were tense, exacerbated by Libya's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and sponsorship of terrorism.⁵⁶ The Benghazi attacks took place against a backdrop of significantly increased demands on US diplomats to be present in the world's most dangerous places to advance American interests and connect with populations beyond capitals and the reach of host governments.⁵⁷ It was a strategic failure of the United States to expect a private security force provided by the transitional Libyan government to be effective in a nation with no clear governmental authority in place after Qaddafi's death. Per international standards, a host nation is generally responsible for maintaining the security of other nations' diplomatic missions and facilities within its borders.⁵⁸ A nation's diplomatic mission refers to the personnel abroad who are official representatives of their government.⁵⁹ Diplomacy is essential to transnational relations, and keeping diplomatic personnel safe overseas is of paramount importance. Without a governing authority, these declarations could not be guaranteed, and American staffers were left vulnerable.

Benghazi was not the first major siege against an American diplomatic facility in the MENA region. The Marine barracks and US Embassy bombings in Beirut, Lebanon, in April 1983 prompted the creation of "The Report of the Secretary of State's Advisory Panel on Overseas Security" (known as the Inman Report) in 1985.⁶⁰ This report suggested that security protocols at the time for American emissaries, buildings, and property needed significant reform. The report concluded that buildings housing American personnel outside the United States were vulnerable and did not meet modern security standards.⁶¹ In accordance with the 30-year-old Inman Report's findings, significant changes to the temporary mission facility's physical security would have been required if the United States was to maintain a presence in Libya until the end of that year.⁶²

Intelligence activities are not perfect, as their systems face trade-offs like all organizations because of a built-in failure rate as they endeavor to uncover secret information.⁶³ The ARB concluded that systemic failures such as "stove piping" (information remained siloed and failure to substantially vet new information occurred), along with managerial shortcomings back in Washington, led to critical decisions that left the Special Mission in Benghazi with significant security shortfalls.⁶⁴ Despite warnings from DS officers in Benghazi, the State Department wanted to build embassies and consulates in

urban areas that would “contribute to the civic and urban fabric of host cities.”⁶⁵

The Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs found the Benghazi facility’s temporary status also had a detrimental effect on security decisions.⁶⁶ The facility was temporary because there were plans to move to a more secure building the following year. In the months before the attacks, the IC provided ample strategic warning that the security situation “was deteriorating and that U.S. facilities and personnel were at risk.”⁶⁷ The political turmoil engulfing Libya at the time should have been enough of an indicator for the State Department to increase security at the diplomatic compound and acknowledge that other incidents were possible. However, it became too difficult to sustain large numbers of DS agents on short-term tours because there was no pool of trained agents in Libya.⁶⁸ Official investigations were conducted after the Benghazi attacks to address security concerns and methods for future mitigation. The ARB concluded that the State Department needed greater communication and transparency in preparing for and anticipating future dangers.⁶⁹

Cables from the embassy to Washington indicated specific requests to improve security. Speaking before Congress after the attack, Eric A. Nordstrom, Regional Security Officer for the Bureau of Diplomacy, testified that incidents in Libya between June 2011 and leading up to the terrorist attack in 2012 “paint[ed] a clear picture that the environment in Libya was fragile at best and could degrade quickly.”⁷⁰ On March 28, 2012, citing a “constantly evolving environment” as “Tripoli seeks to transition from emergency to normalized security operations,” the American embassy in Libya requested increased security, including temporarily assigned DS agents on 45–60-day rotations with 12 for Tripoli and five for Benghazi to replace the smaller Mobile Security Deployment.⁷¹ In a July 9 cable from Tripoli, the embassy explained, “overall security conditions continue to be unpredictable, with large numbers of armed groups and individuals not under control of the central government, and frequent clashes in Tripoli and other major population centers.”⁷²

On August 2, the current security condition was described as “unpredictable, volatile, and violent.”⁷³ The American embassy stated the “host nation security support is lacking and cannot be depended on to provide a safe and secure environment” for the US diplomatic mission. A month later, the embassy reported that Fawzi Younis, acting principal officer in Benghazi and Supreme Security Council commander in Libya, then believed that security forces “were too weak to keep the country secure.”⁷⁴ Sent on the

day of the attacks, an additional cable noted much of the threat came from “a few key brigade commanders, who have been seeking government positions in security ministries [and] may be developing higher political and economic aspirations,” indicating increased risks to American personnel.⁷⁵ The State Department concluded that frequent small-scale attacks were normal and not indicative of a larger threat and took no further action.⁷⁶

Another security failure to consider is the cultural differences between the United States and Libya at the time. Non-Western, destabilized nations continue to pose security challenges because Western states tend to have difficulty adapting their strategies to other societies. The outcome of the asymmetric conflict in Afghanistan lends weight to this sentiment. Van Dyke suggests that means and methods of intelligence analysts feeding security situations during these missions will continue to be tested due to the increase in asymmetrical threats derived from the very nature of the unstable contexts in which they work.⁷⁷

The departments of Defense and State had not jointly assessed the availability of US assets to support the diplomatic compound in Benghazi prior to the attack. When a crisis occurred, resources were mobilized, but there was no personnel close enough to reach Benghazi in a timely fashion.⁷⁹ If a high threat incident occurred, the Defense Department’s Africa Command (AFRICOM) would work with the State Department to develop security assessments and evacuation plans.⁸⁰ A high-threat incident is defined as political violence that will have serious adverse consequences for American diplomats overseas.⁸¹ The lack of clear communication between AFRICOM and the State Department meant that there was no timetable for an evacuation response, and it was unknown how many people were in the compound should a rescue be enacted.⁸² Knowing how many people are to be extracted and how long it would take is valuable information to consider when implementing a rapid response and evacuation of any facility. The aforementioned security failures witnessed in Benghazi in 2012 exposed the State Department’s lack of situational agility due to bureaucratic delays. These failures also reflect the need to transform how intelligence is disseminated and made actionable.

Organizational failures occur when policies and procedures are not agile enough to handle atypical situations. To rectify administrative or procedural issues, several departments within government must cooperate to achieve a singular goal. To illustrate this point, the ARB recommends the [State] Department reexamine DS organization and management, with a particular emphasis on the span of control for security policy planning for

all overseas US diplomatic facilities.⁸³ Discrete organizations working together must contend with different procedures, hierarchical structures, and even language differences when conducting business independently of one another. Command decisions within the IC are often made with limited information available, so clear communication is critical for operational success.

There are advantages and disadvantages to the structure of large organizations such as the State Department. One strength is that more data from intelligence activities can be gathered and evaluated than individuals or small groups could collect.⁸⁴ Reporting lines are well defined in a large, centralized organization like State, which runs in a top-down manner, where decisions are made by upper-level administrators and are filtered down to lower-level employees. One notable disadvantage large organizations have is that information flows in a single direction (top-down) and any existing information gaps, due to the secret nature of intelligence, are exacerbated by the lack of open communication. Allison argues one way to think about government is as a conglomerate of loosely allied organizations, each with a substantial life of their own that acts semiautonomously to resolve problems.⁸⁵ This type of organizational structure within government can lead to information being siloed and limit government efficacy.

To address this deficiency, one solution is for organizations dependent on intelligence to change their structure to become more decentralized and delegate to employees on the ground because they have more information at their disposal.⁸⁶ If such a change were implemented, people closer to the information on location would not need to go all the way to the top of the hierarchy to make effective policy changes. Security decisions should be made with information and context provided by people whom the decision will directly affect. Instead, these decisions are being made in the US capital, 5,000 miles away, using standardized procedures that may not adequately fit the scenario. However, projects that require several organizations to act with high degrees of precision and coordination are not likely to succeed because the behavior of the government relevant to an issue has been predetermined by standard operating procedures (SOPs) for that issue.⁸⁷ President John F. Kennedy once expressed his frustration with trying to implement changes inside the State Department: "To change anything in the [State Department] is like punching a feather bed. You punch it with your right and you punch it with your left until you are finally exhausted, and then you find the damn bed just as it was before you started punching."⁸⁸

Operating outside the norm created by standardization can cause organizational failures that lead to poor decision making in real time. However, not all scenarios are covered by SOPs, and those scenarios require atypical expeditious solutions. Autonomy can give rise to motivation and innovation, both of which are necessary for creative problem solving. The post-September 11 era has seen an increase in nonstate actors and lone-wolf terrorism, with conventional warfare replaced by suicide bombings and guerilla tactics. Combating this “new terrorism” demands procedural modifications because what has worked previously may not necessarily be effective in the present or future. The conventional threats of the past have been replaced by the enormous complexity of a fluid, asymmetric environment, which implies that the organizational model of the past—which is still largely in place—is of diminishing utility and clinging to it leaves the United States vulnerable to systemic failures.⁸⁹ Threats to security are dynamic, and to keep pace the structure of the IC within the State Department must also adapt. The world is in flux, and organizations must remain flexible in order to maintain US national security.

In the case of the Benghazi raids, the ARB found that the site’s vulnerability was due, in part, to “systemic failures and leadership and management deficiencies at senior levels within two bureaus [DS and Near Eastern Affairs] of the State Department.”⁹⁰ Organizations like the State Department may benefit from decentralization to maximize the likelihood that new ideas will be produced, making it easier for the organization to adapt to a changing environment.⁹¹ Every organization is reliant on SOPs as a means of conducting regular activities. However, decentralization gives more employees ownership of their decisions and allows for more effective change from the bottom up.

The raids on the US diplomatic compound in Benghazi in 2012 were successful due to failures at the intelligence, security, and organizational levels of government. Events unfolding for years prior to the raids suggested these American establishments were at risk, and little was done to amend existing security protocols at these sites. In addition, because the Benghazi stations were unique, the government failed to act effectively, having no procedures that would ensure the safety of the teams stationed there. These government inefficiencies resulted in an untimely and ineffective response that eventually contributed to the deaths of three security personnel and the United States ambassador to Libya.

Gathering credible intelligence is only part of the function of the IC. It must also interpret the intelligence and make effective decisions about policy

and next steps toward threat mitigation. These actions are made more difficult where foreign governments and citizens are concerned, as a host country's customs and etiquette can differ from American norms and values. In addition, intelligence collection becomes more convoluted when massive amounts of data must be sorted and analyzed to look for signals of an impending event and reduce noise due to the amount of data deemed irrelevant or not credible. HUMINT provides local expertise by developing assets that will pass on information to intelligence officers, but these relationships often take copious amounts of time and money to cultivate. HUMINT also has shortcomings because assets might give false information or behave as double agents and give secrets to an adversary to be used for their counterintelligence initiatives.

Given the chaotic climate of the region at the time of the attacks, there were no measurable efforts to improve security at either the TMF or the CIA Annex. There is a history of violence against Americans in the region, and the State Department was informed of an increased threat level due to the eleventh anniversary of the September 11 attacks. The Arab Spring gave rise to protests and anti-American sentiment as a collateral development of the United States' so-called war on terror. The American ambassador gave multiple warnings to the State Department that he felt the facilities were at risk, but those calls went unanswered.⁹²

The security situation at the TMF and CIA Annex were further complicated by their secretive and temporary designations. No regulations existed for a "temporary" mission facility. The site was designated to be moved to a permanent facility the following year, so its existence was unique. This fact meant it did not fall under any existing category or procedure for security implementation, making it more vulnerable than a permanent diplomatic facility. The transitional nature of the site made it necessary for it to be accompanied by a security force. As stated, the directive at the time from the State Department was to make all diplomatic buildings "less like fortresses" so that they could be approachable and less intimidating to locals.⁹³ To resolve this issue, the State Department rented another piece of property nearby and stationed a CIA security team there. American possession of this property was not promulgated to the Libyan government, so its occupation was of dubious legality. Its clandestine designation made having a large, adequate security team impossible. To remain as hidden as possible, there were no military-style vehicles present.

Having the diplomatic mission and CIA annex in two locations increased the vulnerability of each. When personnel at the annex learned about the attack on the TMF, it took them seven minutes to arrive at the facility. This

response time was enough to have the TMF overrun and engulfed in flames and get two Americans killed. The response lag prompted discussion on why the supplemental security force was positioned in a different location. The Senate Intelligence Committee recommended that, “temporary facilities should have the physical security, personnel, weapons, ammunition, and fire safety equipment needed to adequately address the threat. The Committee understands the need for State to have the flexibility to operate, on a temporary basis, out of facilities that fall short of these standards; however, these operations are extremely vulnerable, as seen in Benghazi.”⁹⁴

The State Department’s structure ultimately failed to protect the people working inside it because stove piping did not allow information to flow to the correct personnel. Information was restricted, which hampered the State Department’s ability to achieve timely results during a crisis. Organizations are blunt instruments, and projects that require several departments to act with high degrees of precision and coordination are not likely to succeed.⁹⁵ According to the ARB report, “there appeared to be very real confusion over who, ultimately, was responsible and empowered to make decisions based on both policy and security concerns” at the State Department’s Bureau of Diplomatic Security, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, the US Embassy in Tripoli, and the Mission facility in Benghazi.⁹⁶ The TMF’s unique status meant that there were no SOPs to manage its security and requests for increases due to over 20 reported incidents at the TMF were ignored, in part, because the security personnel stationed there met minimum requirements.⁹⁷ As a result, the State Department could not act with agility when a unique problem arose.

The terrorist attack at the diplomatic compound in 2012 demonstrates the need for decentralization at the US Department of State. As Allison argued half a century ago and the Senate Committee on Intelligence suggested, decentralization is necessary to improve coordination between departments within large organizations, such as the State Department. Giving control to people on the ground can reduce the response time needed to make decisions and effectuate a more positive outcome with less errors in communication. The Senate Committee on Intelligence report recommended that “the State Department must ensure that security threats are quickly assessed, and security upgrades are put into place with minimal bureaucratic delay. The State Department has made changes since September 11, 2012, including the creation of a new position of Deputy Assistant Secretary for High-Threat Posts. Although this new position will help the State Department focus on high-threat posts, the State Department must make the institutional changes

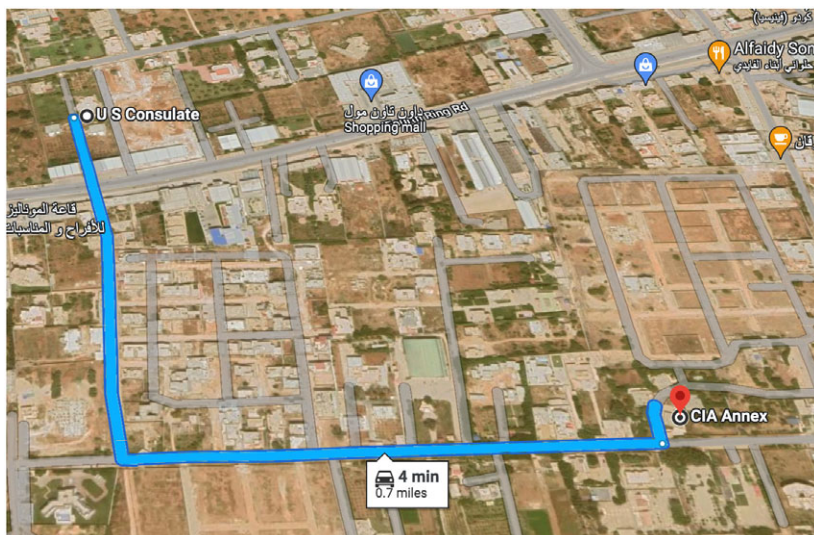


Figure 1. Distance from the U.S. Diplomatic Compound to the CIA Annex, Benghazi, Libya.

Source: Google Maps.

necessary to quickly and efficiently respond to emerging security threats—especially those threats that have been identified numerous times by the U.S. Intelligence Community.”⁹⁸

The remediation suggested in the Senate Committee’s report is an important step in decentralizing authority within the State Department. Creating a new position that has the authority to act reduces the degrees of separation between the people involved in the crisis and those who can make the decisions to act. Despite its reputation, it is possible for the State Department to evolve, as demonstrated by the fact that it set up the TMF with an inconspicuous design.

Regardless of extensive investigations by committees in the US Congress into the 2012 Benghazi terrorist attacks, many questions remain. Although the raids on the diplomatic compound occurred a decade ago, primary sources remain heavily redacted to protect government employees and tactics still used by the State Department, IC, and security operators. How events unfolded remains obscure, only exacerbated by the polarization of the issue given former Secretary of State Clinton’s nomination for the presidency in 2016 and Republicans in Congress’ intentions of using the issue to damage her

electoral prospects. Clinton, President Obama, and the State Department released statements that were not in lockstep, allowing detractors to speculate there was more to the situation than was made public. Presently, questions remain about why the two sites (the TMF and CIA Annex) were allowed to operate with an inadequate number of security specialists and how far up the chain of command inside the State Department these flaws were known. What is not in question is that failures at multiple levels (security, intelligence, and organizational) put American diplomats, security teams, and civilians at risk. Ambassador Chris Stevens, CIA security operators Glen Doherty and Tyrone Woods, and diplomat Sean Smith paid for those failures with their lives.

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NOTES

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