

US prepares military strikes as Libya crisis deepens

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The White House is considering launching drone strikes and Special Forces raids in retaliation for the fatal September 11 attacks on the US consulate and a CIA facility in Libya's eastern city of Benghazi, the Associated Press reported Monday.

Pressure is building for the Obama administration to take military action before the presidential election in less than three weeks, as the Republicans and their presidential candidate Mitt Romney continue their efforts to turn the Benghazi incident into a central issue in the campaign.

"The White House, under political pressure to respond forcefully to the Sept. 11 attack on the US Consulate in Benghazi, is readying strike forces and drones but first has to find a target," according to the AP report, which cited three current administration officials and one former official, as well as an outside analyst consulted by the White House.

The outside analyst, who has extensive experience in Africa, told AP that the administration had contacted him for help in "connecting the dots"—the same language used by the Bush administration in fabricating its case for the invasion of Iraq—between the Benghazi attack and northern Mali, where

Islamists, including elements linked to Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), have taken control of territory roughly the size of France.

The Islamists in the area have denied any connection to the attack in Benghazi, which claimed the life of the US ambassador to Libya, J. Christopher Stevens, and three other Americans. A spokesman for the Islamists told AP: "If America hits us, I promise you we will multiply the Sept. 11 attack by 10."

The other movement suspected in connection with the attack, the Libyan Islamist militia Ansar al Shariah, has also denied responsibility. According to AP, citing the unnamed US officials, "US investigators have only linked 'one or two names' to the attack and they lack proof that

it was planned ahead of time or that local fighters had any help from the larger Al Qaeda affiliate."

The report adds that Washington is more likely to "simply target the suspects with US covert action" than to ask the Libyan government and Libyan security forces, which exert little control over Benghazi or, indeed, the rest of the country, to arrest and extradite them.

The overriding aim of such action, delivered as an "October surprise" on the eve of the vote in November, would be to counter the Republicans' exploitation of the Benghazi attack to cast the Obama administration as insufficiently aggressive in its foreign policy.

Libyan officials have warned that a unilateral US attack on militias in Benghazi has the potential of accelerating the country's disintegration.

In a transparent attempt to deflect Republican attacks, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared Monday, during a state visit to Peru, that she, not Obama, was responsible for the security arrangements at US facilities in Libya. Former security officials at the embassy in Tripoli testified at a congressional hearing last week that they had sought to keep a larger US armed force there, but officials in Washington rejected their request.

"I take responsibility," Clinton told CNN, while going on to state that "security professionals" made the decisions on embassy security. She also disputed Republican charges that the Obama administration had deliberately misled the public by claiming for two weeks after the Benghazi attack that it had resulted from a "spontaneous" demonstration against a rabidly anti-Islamic video, rather than a planned terrorist attack. She attributed the shift in the administration's position to "the fog of war."

She said that her aim was to avoid "some kind of political gotcha or blame game."

Republicans, however, were having none of it. Three Republican members of the Senate Armed Services

Committee—John McCain of Arizona, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire—issued a statement insisting, “The security of Americans serving our nation everywhere in the world is ultimately the job of the commander-in-chief. The buck stops there.”

The Republicans’ attack on Obama is opportunistic and cynical. They know that the Democrats cannot effectively answer their accusations. The real issue in Benghazi was not merely inadequate security or a politically driven attempt to misrepresent the attack.

Rather, what unraveled with the assault on the American consulate in Benghazi was what the US had been doing there since Ambassador Stevens was first sent aboard a freighter in April 2011 to serve as Washington’s liaison to the so-called “rebels.”

The aim was to use Libyan militias—armed, funded and trained by the US and its allies—to follow up on the ground the intensive air war conducted by the US and NATO for the purpose of toppling Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and installing a more pliant puppet regime in his place. Determined to avoid putting American “boots on the ground,” Stevens and Washington forged an alliance with Gaddafi’s longest standing opponents, elements who came out of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, which was in turn affiliated with Al Qaeda.

As a result of this strategy, which enjoyed bipartisan support, Washington armed, trained and militarily supported militias that were led by figures such as Abdelhakim Belhadj, who headed the Tripoli Military Council, and Sufyan Ben Qumu, who commanded the Darnah Brigade in the war to topple Gaddafi and went on to become a leader of Ansar al Shariah. The former had been subjected to torture and extraordinary rendition by the CIA before being turned over to the Gaddafi regime in 2004, while the latter spent five years in Guantanamo before being sent back to Libya. He has been named by some sources as a suspect in the Benghazi attack.

Washington’s aim was to harness these Al Qaeda-linked forces to the US-NATO war effort and shove them aside once Gaddafi was overthrown. However, with no real central government having emerged in Tripoli, and reconstruction of the devastated country yet to begin, the militias, bitter over the US failure to cut them in on the spoils of war, continue to exercise control over much of Libya. Under these conditions, the assassination of Stevens was a matter of Washington’s chickens coming home to roost.

Until the September 11 attack on the Benghazi

consulate, the ostensible Libyan success was being promoted within the US ruling establishment as a new model for waging war for regime-change, and it was reprised in the form of the sectarian civil war to oust Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

Libyan Islamist fighters and weapons have played a significant role in the Syrian war, and there is every reason to believe that the beefed-up CIA station in Benghazi—along with another CIA base on the Turkish-Syrian border—was involved in working out the logistics of getting them to the new battle front.

Neither the Obama administration nor the Republicans can raise the central issue posed by the attack on the US consulate in Benghazi—the alliance between the US and Al Qaeda-linked forces in both Libya and Syria—because it explodes the pretense of the “war on terror,” which has served as the basic ideological framework for the eruption of US militarism in the Middle East and Central Asia since 9/11.

The imperialist operations in Libya and Syria have been facilitated from the outset by a collection of petty-bourgeois pseudo-left organizations, such as the International Socialist Organization, that have provided “left” justifications for Western intervention in support of the Libyan and Syrian “revolutions.”

Now, with the events in Benghazi, this strategy has blown up in Washington’s face on the eve of the presidential elections. Whatever partisan hay the Republican challenger attempts to make of it, this disaster will serve as the starting point for a new and more massive US military intervention in the region once the elections are over.



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