

The diversionary debate over the Benghazi attack

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One month after the deaths of Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans in the assault on the US consulate and a CIA facility in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi, the incident has become an issue in the US presidential elections.

Wednesday's congressional hearing on the September 11 attack was marked by heated partisan exchanges, with Republicans attempting to indict the Obama administration for failing to provide adequate security for US personnel in Libya. Democrats countered that the Republicans were seeking to "politicize a tragedy" after having themselves forced through cuts in spending for embassy security.

The initial description of the attack as a spontaneous act arising from region-wide demonstrations against an anti-Islamic video was, the Republicans suggested, tantamount to a cover-up of an Al Qaeda terrorist action. In a television interview Wednesday night, President Obama rejected this argument, insisting that the initial reports were based on available information and were corrected once his administration had a "fuller picture."

The former chief of security at the American embassy in Tripoli and the commander of a 16-member military security team that had been deployed there but then withdrawn testified that they had both asked for the team to be kept in place but were overruled by the State Department.

What is striking about this debate is that it deliberately skirts the fundamental political questions. What is the state of Libya nearly one year after the gruesome murder of its former head of state, Muammar Gaddafi, signaled the victory of the US-NATO war to topple his regime? And how is it that this war, supposedly waged to protect human life and promote democracy, has produced a situation in which Al Qaeda-

linked militias are able to operate with impunity?

It was not only the State Department bureaucracy that wanted to dispense with militarized security at US facilities in Libya, but Ambassador Stevens himself. Both were promoting the lie that the US war had "liberated" the Libyan people and created a new "democracy" in North Africa.

The reality of Libya one year after the lynching of Gaddafi is one of chaos bordering on civil war, in which there is no functioning government and hundreds of heavily armed militias in control of much of the country. Within official circles, Libya is increasingly being described as a "failed state" and the "next Afghanistan."

The forcing out of Mustafa Abu Shagur—the longtime CIA asset who was elected prime minister on September 12—means that the government has had four leaders in the space of a month, as bitter struggles between regional factions for a division of spoils and posts has paralyzed the powerless regime.

Meanwhile, the situation in Bani Walid provides the starkest indication of Libya's condition a year after "liberation." Thousands of militiamen, most of them from the city of Misrata, have laid siege to Bani Walid, a town of some 70,000, refusing to allow food, medicine or other supplies in or its residents out. They have bombarded the city with Grad rockets and tank fire and, according to doctors at the local hospital, have apparently used shells containing gas against residential neighborhoods. Smaller outlying villages that have fallen to the former "rebels" have been looted and burned.

At least three people have been killed in the bombardment, including a child, and others have been badly wounded and are at risk of dying without proper medical care.

This atrocity is being perpetrated with the official sanction of the General National Congress, which authorized the use of military force if the local leaders of Bani Walid failed to turn over individuals allegedly responsible for the killing of a former “rebel” who was involved in the hunting down and murder of Gaddafi last year.

Bani Walid was among the last Libyan cities to fall to NATO and its proxy militias after protracted bombardment. Hundreds of its residents were rounded up and imprisoned by the US-backed forces.

There are an estimated 9,000 detainees being held in Libya, in many cases for a year or more, in makeshift militia jails where they are routinely tortured. The International Center for Prison Studies recently described Libya as the country with the largest share of prisoners being held without charges or trials (89 percent). Nearly 15 percent of them are foreigners, in their overwhelming majority sub-Saharan African migrant workers who were rounded up because of the color of their skin.

The Libyan Observatory for Human Rights, which had opposed the Gaddafi regime, declared recently, “The human rights situation in Libya now is far worse than under the late dictator Muammar Gaddafi.”

Within this nightmarish scenario, Islamist militias, many with their origins in the Al Qaeda-linked Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, whose leaders were hunted down by the CIA in Washington’s “war on terror,” have emerged as among the most powerful actors in Benghazi and elsewhere.

This is no accident. Washington armed and backed precisely these forces in the US-NATO war for Libyan regime-change. This war was driven by neither democracy nor humanitarianism, but rather by US imperialism’s quest for hegemony over the Middle East and its vast energy resources. In the absence of a genuine mass revolutionary movement from below, Washington opportunistically made use of the Islamist forces for its own ends, cynically portraying them as the bearers of a democratic revolution.

Just as in Afghanistan, where Washington backed Al Qaeda and similar forces in a war against a Moscow-backed government and the Soviet military, US imperialism has begun in Benghazi to reap the “blowback” from the Libyan intervention.

Political pressure is mounting on the Obama

administration to complete the circle with the Libyan Islamists—first hunted as terrorists and then lauded as freedom fighters—by making good on the president’s vow to bring the ambassador’s killers “to justice.” Should this take the likely form of either drone missile strikes or Special Forces raids on Benghazi, it will deepen Libya’s disintegration and open up yet another front in US imperialism’s endless global wars.

Neither the Democrats nor the Republicans have any desire to discuss these political roots of the Benghazi attack. Both parties are seeking to repeat the Libyan adventure on a far more dangerous level by backing similar Islamist militias in the sectarian civil war to topple Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Indeed, an estimated 3,500 Libyan militiamen have been sent into Syria as shock troops in this war.

The real lesson of the Benghazi affair, which neither party will address, is its exposure of the fraud of the war on terror and the real character of Libya’s “revolution” and Washington’s “humanitarian” intervention, which were enthusiastically embraced by wide layers of the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left in the US and internationally.

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