

US spy agencies edited Benghazi “talking points”

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The Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the central coordinating body for the US intelligence apparatus, removed references to “al Qaeda” and “terrorism” from the documents that guided the initial Obama administration response to the September 11 attacks on US facilities in Benghazi, Libya, according to reports appearing this week in the US media.

CBS News and the *Los Angeles Times* both carried accounts of the DNI’s role in editing the “talking points” provided to US government spokesmen, including Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice, during the first week after the attacks on the US consulate and a CIA annex that left four Americans dead, including US ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens.

Rice appeared on four Sunday television talk shows September 16, delivering a message that linked the Benghazi attack to protests that swept the Muslim world over an anti-Muslim video made in Los Angeles and publicized in early September over the Internet.

DNI spokesman Shawn Turner told CBS News, “The intelligence community assessed from the very beginning that what happened in Benghazi was a terrorist attack.” But the DNI office, reviewing “talking points” for Rice and other officials drafted by the CIA, downplayed the planned character of the attack and changed references to “terrorism” and “Al Qaeda” to a more general attribution of the violence to “extremists.” Further edits were made by the FBI, which was in charge of investigating the Benghazi incident, the network reported.

According to CBS, the DNI toned down the references to terrorism because “the links to al Qaeda were deemed too ‘tenuous’ to make public.” However, another “senior intelligence official” who spoke to CBS defended the edits as made necessary by the need

to protect “sensitive details.”

In the final weeks of the US election campaign, Republican Party spokesmen and right-wing media mouthpieces like Fox News portrayed Rice’s appearances as a deliberate effort by the White House to deceive the American public and sustain Obama’s posture as the “commander-in-chief” who killed Osama bin Laden and decimated the Al Qaeda group.

This polemic was itself politically motivated, as the Romney campaign and its ultra-right backers sought to generate an “October surprise” that could be used to destabilize the Obama administration and even defeat Obama’s reelection bid.

The Republican campaign took advantage of the inability of the Obama administration to explain the actual circumstances surrounding the Benghazi debacle: the close ties which American imperialism has formed with its nominal adversary in the “war on terror,” the Islamic fundamentalist groups linked to Al Qaeda.

The Obama administration and the military made use of the services of Islamic fundamentalist gunmen in the campaign to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, with the result that such forces now dominate much of the country, including the eastern region around Benghazi, where the US-backed revolt began.

The attack on the consulate and CIA annex was conducted by the very same forces armed and mobilized by the CIA against Gaddafi, who now turned their weapons against their American sponsors. This was a classic example of “blowback,” similar to what took place in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s, where the CIA-backed “mujaheddin,” organized to fight the Soviet army, recruited Osama bin Laden and gave rise to Al Qaeda in the first place.

Even more important than their role last year in

Libya, similar forces are on the US payroll in Syria, where they play a leading role in the armed attacks on regime of Bashar al-Assad, now the target of an imperialist-inspired campaign of destabilization. In the eyes of the Obama administration, the overthrow of Assad, Iran's only Arab ally, would pave the way for the next stage in American imperialism's takeover of the Middle East, a military attack on Iran itself.

It is clear from the DNI's role in vetting the official statements on Benghazi that references to terrorism were removed, not to avoid short-term electoral embarrassment to the Obama-Biden campaign, but to avoid drawing undue attention to the relations that have been formed between the US military-intelligence apparatus and its supposed chief adversary, Al Qaeda.

Former CIA Director David Petraeus discussed these issues in closed-door testimony November 15-16 before the House and Senate intelligence committees. Petraeus abruptly resigned November 9 in what was officially described as an unrelated scandal over an extramarital affair. There is little question, however, that his ouster is related to the ongoing political conflict within the US military-intelligence apparatus and in the US ruling elite more generally over how to pursue imperialist interests in the Middle East.

Senator John McCain of Arizona, who has led the denunciations of supposed White House interference in the Benghazi affair, admitted he was "somewhat surprised and frustrated" by the news reports that the intelligence agencies, not the White House, had toned down references to terrorism in the first statements on the Libyan events.

Another Republican leader, House Intelligence Committee chairman Mike Rogers, issued a statement claiming the DNI's explanation contradicts that provided by Petraeus. He said that he "looks forward to discussing this new explanation" with DNI director James Clapper "as soon as possible."



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