

The Benghazi diversion

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The US media has been consumed over the last week with a revival of political infighting between the Democrats and Republicans over the circumstances surrounding the attack on US diplomatic and intelligence facilities in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi in 2012.

President Barack Obama has waged illegal wars (Libya), armed Islamic fundamentalists (Syria), provoked civil wars (Ukraine) and asserted the right of the president to order the assassination of any person, including American citizens, without trial or even a hearing. The Obama administration has built up the infrastructure of a police state, greatly expanding the US spying apparatus and seeking to monitor and collect the telecommunications, email and Internet activities of virtually everyone on the planet.

But the Republican-controlled House of Representatives is pushing for an investigation, not of any of these countless crimes against international law, the US Constitution and basic democratic rights, but of ... White House talking points on Benghazi. On May 8, the House voted 233-186, along nearly party lines, to establish a select committee to investigate the incident.

On September 11, 2012, a crowd of Islamic fundamentalists attacked first the US consulate, then a CIA annex a few blocks away, leaving two Americans dead at each location. One of them was US ambassador Christopher Stevens, who died of smoke inhalation when the consulate was set on fire.

In the initial hours after the event, CIA officials put forward the story that the attack was a spontaneous popular reaction to an American bigot's posting an anti-Islamic video on the Internet. Such protests did take place in a number of cities in the Arab world, notably in Cairo. The Obama administration based its public statements on this CIA account, including the now-notorious appearances on news programs by UN Ambassador Susan Rice.

The story of video-inspired protests proved false: surveillance footage showed there had been no protest in Benghazi, but rather a group of armed men who scouted

the locations and attacked in force after dark. The hired Libyan security guards fled, and the attackers overran the consulate, leaving Stevens and an aide dead. The Islamists then moved on to the CIA annex, which was successfully defended, albeit with two deaths among the US contractors guarding it.

Republicans are claiming that the State Department, the White House or other government agencies are engaged in a cover-up of Benghazi, because of failure to supply one or another document demanded by the eight congressional committees that have already investigated the affair.

The immediate occasion for the establishment of the select committee—a demand of the “Tea Party” faction long resisted by House Speaker John Boehner—was the release of an email from deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes to the State Department, giving the unremarkable advice that Rice should defend the administration's overall Mideast policy when appearing on the Sunday television interview programs.

There are several reasons for the controversy over Benghazi, which has now become a *cause célèbre* for the Republicans. The least important is its role as a factional weapon in American bourgeois politics, where much of the Republican Party sees Benghazi as a missed opportunity, an event that, in their view, should have fatally discredited the Obama administration and led to Obama's defeat in the November 2012 election.

Entirely ignored in this conflict, and in the nonstop coverage of the media, are the real issues involved in the Benghazi incident—above all the connection between the US government and the Islamic fundamentalist forces behind the attack. It is these murky relations that explain both the attempts to obscure what happened on September 11, 2012, and the subsequent internecine conflicts within the political and intelligence apparatus.

There were significant differences between the Pentagon and the State Department, and between both agencies and the CIA, over how best to secure the interests of American imperialism in the region, even

before Benghazi. It is well known that the Pentagon brass, and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in particular, opposed Obama's decision to begin bombing Libya in March 2011, an action strongly backed by Clinton, Susan Rice and other liberal proponents of using "human rights" as a pretext for imperialist war.

Gates and the military were also said to have reservations about the CIA's willingness to make use of Islamic fundamentalists, including those previously active in fighting the US military, for operations in Libya, Syria and elsewhere in North Africa and the Persian Gulf.

The CIA "annex" in Benghazi, far from being an addition to the US diplomatic facility, was the principal base of operations for the US government in the region. The CIA had a much larger presence in eastern Libya than the State Department, having worked to set up the Transitional National Council, the Benghazi-based opposition front group that provided a Libyan face for the US-NATO war in 2011.

After the overthrow and murder of Gaddafi, the CIA shifted its focus to Syria, where Islamic fundamentalist groups quickly came to dominate the so-called rebels fighting the government of Bashar al-Assad. Benghazi became a staging ground for recruiting Islamic fundamentalist militants, not only from Libya but throughout the Muslim world, and providing them with arms and military training before they were plugged into one or another of the rebel groups in Syria. Portions of Gaddafi's vast arms stockpiles, captured in the 2011 war, were shipped to the Syrian insurgents.

According to a detailed report in the *New York Times* last December, those who attacked US facilities in Benghazi on September 11, 2012 were among those recruited, armed and paid by the CIA to fight against the Gaddafi regime. They were US clients who had become dissatisfied with Washington, in some cases for purely mercenary reasons, in others for ideological ones.

The attack on the US consulate and CIA annex in Benghazi in September 2012 was thus an instance of "blowback"—when terrorists armed and trained by the CIA turn their weapons against their former sponsors and attack Americans. This is what took place in the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York and Washington, instigated by the longtime CIA collaborator Osama bin Laden. Much the same thing appears to have happened in Benghazi exactly 11 years later.

There was considerable fingerprinting between the State Department and the CIA in the aftermath of the Benghazi debacle. Given the CIA's preponderance in

personnel and weaponry there, State Department officials suggested that the spy agency should be held responsible for the security breakdown.

CIA Director David Petraeus—who advanced a policy of enrolling Islamic fundamentalists in pro-US militia formations in Iraq during his years as commander of the US military occupation there—resigned abruptly less than two months after the Benghazi events. The purported explanation for his departure, an extramarital affair, can be taken seriously only by the incurably naive.

Besides Benghazi, Petraeus reportedly came in conflict with Obama's top counterterrorism adviser, John Brennan, over control of the US drone missile assassination program. Brennan has since replaced Petraeus at the CIA, while the Pentagon's Joint Special Operations Command has taken over the main role in drone warfare.

Despite the desire on all sides in the internecine dispute to keep the question of the US alliance with Al Qaeda deeply buried, any serious investigation into Benghazi could raise uncomfortable questions.

The alliance between the US government and the reactionary Islamic fundamentalists is a massive ongoing operation, not only in Syria, but throughout the Middle East. The US military-intelligence apparatus, and both Democrats and Republicans, want to avoid any disruption—let alone any examination of the relationship between US agencies and Al Qaeda that could shed light on the murky origins of the 9/11 attacks themselves.



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