

The state of Libya after the Benghazi Attacks

The Benghazi attacks that took place in Libya on September 11, 2012 illustrated the weakness of the Libyan government and altered the political situation going forward in both the domestic and international realms. In order to understand how the attacks contributed to the current political uncertainty in Libya a brief background of Libya's history is needed.

The overthrow and death of Qaddafi allowed for an opening up of the government and many political parties and civil society organizations, that had previously been repressed, reemerged contributing to a lively political atmosphere. (Libya: Transition and US policy). The election of an interim 200 member General National Congress to replace the TNC represented hope for a new type of government. Many Libyans and outside observers have expressed hope that the elected interim Congress will appoint a cabinet that will be able to leverage its democratic legitimacy to act decisively on key issues (Libya: Transition and US policy).

However, Libya's domestic politics consist of fractured coalitions due to Qaddhafi purposely undermining state institutions, including the military, and manipulating tribal, regional, and political groups to maintain power. Transitional authorities have inherited weak national government institutions, and competition among groups has intensified during the transition. Political support for interim leaders has waned in light of the government's failure to improve services, ensure security or deliver financial support and relief.

When analyzing the Benghazi attack on the US Consulate the accountability review board called by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton found the Libyan government's response to be profoundly lacking on the night of the attacks, reflecting both weak capacity and near absence of central government influence and control in Benghazi. The Libyan government did facilitate assistance from a quasi-governmental militia that supported the evacuation of U.S. government personnel to Benghazi airport. The Libyan government also provided a military C-130 aircraft, which was used to evacuate remaining U.S. personnel and the bodies of the deceased from Benghazi to Tripoli on September 12th.

However, the Benghazi attacks on the US Consulate raised questions about the ability of the interim authorities to ensure order. Militia groups have remained active and security officials continue to rely on irregular forces to provide security in much of the country. Differences of opinion over regional representation and the balance of power between national and local authorities may become a source of conflict as the transition continues.

The current state:

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Magariaf and his colleagues disavowed the “criminal attack” and launched an investigation. The Libyan government has also been involved in helping the US investigation into the attacks. According to the New York Times, President Obama met with Libyan Prime Minister Ali Zeidan last week and emphasized the need for Libya's help in finding the attackers. They also discussed ways to strengthen Libya's institutions.

Some Libyan citizens staged demonstrations condemning the attack and expressed deep remorse for the death of Ambassador Stevens.

Current state: The government's response to the attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi will be an even greater test of elected Libyan officials and their ability and willingness to assert state authority. In order to investigate and punish those responsible, Libyan security authorities are likely to have to confront armed non-state actors in a political context in which some Libyans may question the legitimacy of the elected government to do so. (Libya: Transition and US policy).

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Since the attacks the government has continued to have issues controlling the armed militias. According to the New York Times Ansar Al- Shariah remains strong despite protests against it by the local population. Although the government imposed martial law and declared the border closed these pronouncements are not enforceable. Ansar Al- Shariah popularity among the unemployed youth continues to grow leaving the Libyan population concerned about the state of Libya.

According to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, “American and Libyan security personnel battled the attackers together.”⁴ Various accounts suggest Libyan government-affiliated militia units known as the Shield Brigade and the 17th February Martyrs Brigade responded to the attack and supported the evacuation of U.S. personnel on behalf of the Libyan government.⁵

Libyan General National Congress President Mohammed Yusuf al Magariaf has linked Al Qaeda to the attacks in interviews and stated his view that the attacks were planned to correspond with September 11 and avenge Al Libi's death.¹⁰ Al Qaeda's regional affiliate-Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)-released a statement praising the September 11, 2012 attack, but did not claim credit for planning or helping to execute it.¹¹ On September 19, U.S. National Counterterrorism Center Director Matthew Olsen said in Senate testimony that the Administration did not have “specific intelligence that there was significant advanced planning or coordination for this attack,” but analysts were “still developing an answer.

However, we do assess that some of those involved were linked to groups affiliated with, or sympathetic to Al Qaeda.”¹³ The latter assessment could refer to members of any or all of the above mentioned groups acting in cooperation and coordination or individually and independently. R

The widespread possession of military weaponry and experience among Libyan militias and the relative absence of official security forces in Benghazi and other cities suggests that motivated groups or individuals could have attempted such an attack with relatively little notice or required planning.

- Anecdotal reporting from Libya suggests that some groups and movements may withhold support for the government based on the individuals selected for cabinet positions.

The government’s response to the attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi will be an even greater test of elected Libyan officials and their ability and willingness to assert state authority, which to date have been very much in question. In order to investigate and punish those responsible, Libyan security authorities are likely to have to confront armed non-state actors in a political context in which some Libyans may question the legitimacy of the elected government to do so and in which other Libyans may view anti-U.S. protests as legitimate or the attack as having been somehow justified.

Key steps in the transition process, such as cabinet selection and debate over constitutional issues, are now further complicated by the need to respond to the security threats clearly illustrated by the attack. Among the most pressing and potentially divisive political issues are:

While the outstanding issues are formidable, Libyan authorities have moved since the Benghazi attacks to assert greater control over militia groups, collect weapons from civilians, and intensify discussion of a comprehensive security sector reform strategy. After large anti-militia demonstrations on September 16, the government ordered armed groups to formally submit to state authority and named military officers to serve as commanders of some prominent militias. Some security officials have been replaced.

Libya remains in a state of turmoil. The government is working to reign in these armed militia groups, that it once used for protection, while the popularity of these groups among the youth is growing. Citizens are beginning to lose faith in the strength of the government to do so. The Libyan government is also receiving outside pressure from the US government urging them to take a strong stance against these groups.