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U.S. officials: Attack on consulate in Libya may have been planned

By [Karen DeYoung](#), [Michael Birnbaum](#) and [William Branigin](#), Published: September 12

U.S. officials and Middle East analysts said Wednesday that an attack that killed four Americans at a U.S. Consulate in eastern Libya may have been planned by extremists and inspired by al-Qaeda.

The U.S. Ambassador to Libya, J. Christopher Stevens, and three other Americans were killed Tuesday in an assault on the consulate in the city of Benghazi. President Obama strongly condemned the attack and pledged to bring the perpetrators to justice, vowing that “justice will be done.”

The attack followed a violent protest at the U.S. Embassy in Cairo over a low-budget anti-Muslim film made in the United States, and it initially appeared that the assault on the Benghazi consulate was another spontaneous response. But senior U.S. officials and Middle East analysts raised questions Wednesday about the motivation for the Benghazi attack, noting that it involved the use of a rocket-propelled grenade and followed an al-Qaeda call to avenge the death of a senior Libyan member of the terrorist network.

Libyan officials and a witness said the attackers took advantage of a protest over the film to launch their assault.

Stevens, 52, and the others appear to have been killed inside the temporary consulate, possibly by a rocket-propelled grenade, according to officials briefed on the assault.

On Wednesday, administration officials described a fast-moving assault on the Benghazi compound, which quickly overwhelmed Libyan guards and U.S. security forces, and separated the Americans from the ambassador they were supposed to protect. U.S. personnel lost touch with Stevens just minutes into the attack, about 10 p.m. Benghazi time. They didn't see him again until his body was returned to U.S. custody, sometime around dawn.

“Frankly, we are not clear on the circumstances between the time he got separated from the group inside the burning building, to the time we were notified he was in Benghazi hospital,” a senior administration official who spoke on condition of anonymity told reporters. “We were not able to see him until his body was returned to us at the airport.”

Stevens, based in the Libyan capital of Tripoli, happened to be visiting the U.S. outpost in Benghazi at the time of the attack. Officials said he was one of perhaps 25 or 30 people inside the U.S. consulate compound and its annex at 10 p.m. local time (4 p.m. Washington time), when unidentified gunmen began firing from outside.

Within 15 minutes, the officials said, the gunmen had entered the compound, and set its main building on fire. Three people were inside: Stevens, Sean Smith, a Foreign Service information management officer, and a Department of State security officer. As the building filled with dark smoke, the three became separated.

The security officer escaped, then went back inside with another officer. They found Smith dead inside, and pulled his body out. But they could not find Stevens, before being driven out of the building by smoke and gunfire.

Thirty minutes later, U.S. security officers tried again to enter the burning building. They withdrew, and eventually sheltered with all remaining personnel in an annex building. There, the personnel were under siege for two hours, taking fire that killed two more Americans and wounded three others.

The attack did not end until about 8:30 p.m. Washington time, when Libyan security forces helped drive away the attackers. Administration officials said they still were not sure Wednesday who the attackers were, or if the Benghazi attack was related to protests over an anti-Islamic movie at the U.S. embassy in Cairo the same day.

At some point during the attack, officials said, Stevens was taken out of the building where he was last seen.

But they did not know how he got out, if Stevens was dead or alive when he left the compound, or whether he was taken to a hospital.

The Associated Press reported that Stevens arrived at a Benghazi hospital about 7 p.m. Eastern, and was pronounced dead later. Doctors said he died of asphyxiation, due to smoke inhalation. U.S. officials said that would have to be confirmed with an autopsy.

Rep. Mike Rogers (R-Mich.), chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, said there is strong evidence that the attack was planned.

“This was a well-armed, well-coordinated event,” Rogers said in an interview on MSNBC. “It had both indirect and direct fire, and it had military maneuvers that were all part of this very organized attack.” Rogers referred to weapons that aimed directly at a target and those, such as rockets and mortars, that are fired without a direct line of sight.

According to Firas Abdelhakim, a Libyan television journalist who said he witnessed part of the attack, a group of several dozen armed men mounted the assault.

Abdelhakim said he was about three miles from consulate when he saw 20 to 30 cars driving toward the consulate shortly before 9:30 p.m. Tuesday.

When he reached the consulate, he said, he saw about 50 armed men gathering who were not carrying banners or chanting slogans. When asked who they were, they described themselves variously as “Muslims defending the Prophet” and “a group of Muslim youth” who were “defending Islam,” Abdelhakim said.

He said he saw Libyan security forces — the February 17 Battalion — guarding the consulate, a walled-off villa compound with several buildings, a swimming pool and one security watchtower on an unpaved side street in a prosperous residential district of Benghazi.

The assault on the consulate started sometime between 10:30 and 11 p.m., and the two groups traded fire, Abdelhakim said.

Benghazi residents said the compound had never previously had a major security presence around it.

Libyan Deputy Interior Minister Wanis al-Sharif said the security force was outgunned by the attackers, who joined a demonstration of “hundreds” of people outside the consulate. He said the original demonstration, which began as early as noon and escalated during the evening, was apparently called to protest the offensive film.

Sharif said armed men “infiltrated” the protest, but that the Libyan government did not believe they were Islamist militants. Instead, he said, authorities suspect they were loyalists of slain former strongman Moammar Gaddafi who were out to upend the country’s fragile political situation.

“We are going through a war with people from the old regime who are trying to destabilize security,” Sharif said. He also said the Libyan government believes that the first shot came from within the consulate compound, enraging the crowd. And he complained that the consulate should have extracted its employees earlier in the day and taken them to hotels or another secure location for safety.

Sharif said the consulate was completely burned and looted. “The most we expected was taking down the American flag and burning it,” he said. “We didn’t expect what happened to take place.”

The Defense Department has dispatched two Marine antiterrorism security teams to Libya to reinforce security there, a senior Marine official said. In a [statement issued by the White House](#) early Wednesday, Obama said he had directed an increase in security at U.S. diplomatic posts around the world.

(Find the latest updates on The Post’s [live blog](#).)

The FBI said in a statement that it has opened an investigation into the deaths of the four Americans and the attack on the consulate. It said investigators would work closely with the State Department and “the appropriate government partners” in Libya.

“The FBI will not speculate on the facts and circumstances surrounding the attacks,” the statement said.

A U.S. military official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said all four of the dead were State Department civilians. About a half dozen Americans were wounded in the attack, and it was not immediately clear if any of them were military. No U.S. Marines were posted at the consulate as part of its security detail, the official said.

The attack was the latest in a series of violent assaults in Benghazi over the last several months — many, but

not all, directed against U.S. interests there.

Tuesday's assault was the second on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi. On June 5, a bomb exploded outside the gates of the compound in the first targeting of an American facility since the fall of Gaddafi last year.

The following day in Benghazi, two British bodyguards were injured in an attack on a convoy carrying the British ambassador to Libya. Last month, unknown assailants attacked a compound of the International Committee of the Red Cross in the Libyan port city of Misurata. No one was injured in that attack.

A group allied with al-Qaeda has claimed responsibility for several recent assaults in Benghazi. But there was no immediate claim of responsibility for Tuesday's attack.

Obama said Wednesday morning that the United States "condemns in the strongest possible terms this outrageous and shocking attack" and is working with the Libyan government to secure U.S. diplomats and bring the attackers to justice.

Appearing with Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton in the White House Rose Garden, Obama said: "We reject all efforts to denigrate the religious beliefs of others, but there is absolutely no justification to this type of senseless violence. None. The world must stand together to unequivocally reject these brutal acts."

He said many Libyans have already joined that stand, and he vowed, "This attack will not break the bonds between the United States and Libya." He stressed that Libyan security personnel had "fought back against the attackers alongside Americans" and that other Libyans carried Stevens's body to the hospital and helped U.S. diplomats find safety.

Obama added: "We will not waver in our commitment to see that justice is done for this terrible act. And make no mistake, justice will be done."

Obama spoke as some Middle East analysts suggested that the attack in Benghazi might have been launched as revenge for the death of a top al-Qaeda militant who was killed by an American drone strike in Pakistan in June.

Mathieu Guidere, a professor of Islamic studies at the University of Toulouse in France and an expert on Islamist radicals, said information from militant Web sites suggested that Libyan extremists seized on the film to rally people around an attack on the consulate. He said the attack appeared to be motivated by a recent call by Ayman al-Zawahiri, the al-Qaeda leader, to avenge the killing of Hassan Mohammed Qaed, better known as Abu Yahya al-Libi, a Libyan-born cleric who was a key aide to Osama bin Laden.

Quillam, a respected British think-tank that monitors extremist groups, said its sources in Libya and elsewhere in the region described the attack as a well-planned assault that occurred in two waves and was organized by a group of about 20 militants. The first wave involved driving the Americans from the consulate, and the second was a coordinated attack using a rocket-propelled grenade after they were taken to another location.

"These are acts committed by uncontrollable jihadist groups," said Noman Benotam, the president of Quillam.

Zawahiri, an Egyptian who took over as al-Qaeda leader after bin Laden was killed in a U.S. raid on his Pakistani hideout in May, issued a 42-minute video Monday acknowledging Libi's death and calling on Muslims, particularly fellow Libyans, to seek vengeance for the killing.

"With the martyrdom of Sheikh Hassan Mohammed Qaed, may God have mercy on him, people will flock even more to his writings and his call, God willing," Zawahiri said in the video. "His blood urges you and incites you to fight and kill the crusaders."

Stevens, a [longtime Middle East hand in the State Department](#), was named ambassador to Libya in May. He had worked in Libya for a number of years, both before and after the fall of Gaddafi.

In an interview with The Washington Post in June, Stevens said Libya's emerging democracy faces a threat from small, violent Islamist groups that reject elections.

"These are, for the most part, new groups that are emerging after the revolution, and the Libyans themselves don't know who they are," Stevens said. "Some of these groups are probably forming out of the militias that grew out of the revolution, and they have access to arms, so that is troubling."

On the recent series of violent incidents in Libya, Stevens said, "When people cross the line, it's also a function of a lack of strong state and police to enforce the law."

Obama called Stevens a "courageous and exemplary representative" of the U.S. government, who "selflessly served our country and the Libyan people."

“His legacy will endure wherever human beings reach for liberty and justice,” Obama said.

Clinton said she had called Libyan President Mohamed Yusuf al-Magariaf “to coordinate additional support to protect Americans in Libya.”

The attack in Benghazi followed protests in neighboring Egypt, where a group of protesters scaled the wall of the U.S. Embassy in Cairo on Tuesday evening and entered its outer grounds, pulled down an American flag, then tried to burn it outside the embassy walls, according to witnesses. On Wednesday morning, a sit-in by several dozen protesters continued outside the Cairo embassy.

The attack on the embassy in Cairo was apparently prompted by outrage over an independent, anti-Muslim film made in the United States. It illustrated a deep vein of anti-American sentiment, even though the United States supported Arab Spring revolutions and was instrumental in providing financial and diplomatic support for their newly-democratic governments.

After his Rose Garden remarks, Obama headed to the State Department with Clinton to address a closed session of the diplomatic workforce. A White House official said Obama held the meeting “to express his solidarity with our diplomats stationed around the world.” The official said Obama wanted to “give thanks for the service and sacrifices that our civilians make, and pay tribute to those who were lost.”

Clinton identified Smith as a Foreign Service information management officer for 10 years who was on a temporary assignment in Libya. She said Smith, an Air Force veteran, left a wife and two children. The names of the other two people killed were being withheld pending notification of their families, Clinton said.

Before appearing at the White House with Obama, Clinton called those who attacked the Benghazi consulate a “small and savage group,” praised the response by the Libyan government and people to the violence and said the assault would not deter the United States from helping Libya become free and stable.

“This is an attack that should shock the conscience of people of all faiths around the world,” Clinton said in a solemn speech at the State Department. “We condemn in the strongest possible terms this senseless act of violence.”

“Today many Americans are asking — indeed I asked myself — how could this happen,” she said. “How could this happen in a country we helped liberate, in a city we helped save from destruction? This question reflects just how complicated and, at times, how confounding, the world can be. But we must be clear-eyed even in our grief. This was an attack by a small and savage group, not by the people or government of Libya.”

Clinton said Libyans had helped to repel the attackers and lead other Americans to safety, and she said Libya’s president has pledged to pursue those responsible.

Stressing that “a free and stable Libya” is in the U.S. interest, Clinton said, “We will not turn our back on that. Nor will we rest until those responsible for these attacks are found and brought to justice.”

She said some people have sought to justify the violence as “a response to inflammatory material posted on the Internet.” She added: “There is no justification for this.... Violence like this is no way to honor religion or faith, and as long as there are those who would take innocent life in the name of God, the world will never know a true and lasting peace.”

Both the Egyptian and Libyan governments condemned the violence outside the American diplomatic compounds. But local security officials in both countries appeared slow to provide protection for the American diplomatic installations and have issued no firm statements explaining the violence.

In a news conference in Tripoli Wednesday, Libya’s prime minister and parliamentary speaker apologized for the assault and extended sympathy for the deaths to the United States and families of the victims.

While they provided no details, they offered two alternative theories regarding the perpetrators, saying at one point that Gaddafi loyalists were responsible but later saying that it involved “extremists” and was related to Tuesday’s anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States.

The film that appeared to have sparked the protest in Cairo is called “The Innocence of Muslims.” It calls the prophet Muhammad a fraud and shows him having sex. A controversial Cairo television host, Sheikh Khaled Abdallah, aired clips from the video on an Islamic-focused television station on Saturday, and the same video clips were posted online on Monday.

A man who identified himself as Sam Bacile said he made the film. Bacile had gone into hiding on Tuesday, but remained defiant in his condemnations of Islam, the Associated Press reported.

Bacile described himself to several news organizations as an Israeli-born Jew who works as a real estate developer in California. The Washington Post included that identification, citing the AP interview. But Steve

Klein, an associate of Bacile, told the Atlantic that Bacile was in fact a pseudonym. Bacile is not listed in any directories or incorporations or real estate deeds and is not licensed in California as a real estate broker.

The crisis quickly spilled over into the U.S. presidential campaign, as Mitt Romney issued a brief statement saying he was “outraged” by the assaults. Romney then said, “It’s disgraceful that the Obama administration’s first response was not to condemn the attacks on our diplomatic missions, but to sympathize with those who waged the attacks.”

Obama’s reelection campaign quickly responded in kind, saying, “We are shocked that, at a time when the United States of America is confronting the tragic death of one of our diplomatic officers in Libya, Governor Romney would choose the launch of a political attack.”

Romney, speaking to reporters on the campaign trail Wednesday, [stood by his criticism](#).

Stevens was the first U.S. ambassador to be [killed in the line of duty](#) since 1988, when Arnold Raphel was killed in a mysterious airplane crash in Pakistan along with Pakistani president Zia ul-Haq.

Birnbaum reported from Cairo. Sari Horwitz, Douglas Frantz, Tara Bahrapour, Craig M. Whitlock and David A. Farenthold in Washington, Edward Cody in Paris, Haitham Tabei in Cairo, and Ingy Hassieb in El-Arish, Egypt, contributed to this report.

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