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CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

**Learning from Benghazi: Rethinking
Preparedness and Response for
Security of U.S. Embassies,
Consulates, and Diplomatic Missions
in High-Risk Scenarios**

**Testimony before
Committee on Foreign Affairs
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My name is Dr. James Jay Carafano. I am the Deputy Director of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies and Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own, and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today and address this vital subject. The many U.S. embassies, consulates, and diplomatic missions around the world are the clearest and boldest statement of the United States' determination to represent the interests of the nation and its citizens and to engage other peoples in the common pursuit of prosperity, peace, and freedom. Providing security for these outposts that protect U.S. personnel and their operations, while at the same time facilitating the accomplishment of the mission, is vital. At Benghazi something went terribly wrong. U.S. diplomatic personnel should not have been placed in this kind of jeopardy without purposeful and adequate measures to mitigate risk. We must learn from this tragedy how to do better.

In my testimony today, I would like to concentrate on what I see as four key questions that must be addressed in evaluating the system in place to ensure the security of U.S. diplomatic personnel and facilities overseas: (1) What counterterrorism and early measures were in place to proactively address threats? (2) What risk assessments were performed and what risk mitigation measures were adopted prior to the attack? (3) What contingency planning was undertaken and exercised to respond to armed assaults against U.S. facilities in Benghazi? (4) How was the interagency response to the incident organized and managed?

I believe these are the four key questions that must be fully and completely answered in order to conduct a proper case study of the Benghazi attack and draw appropriate lessons that might be applied to addressing how we better protect those that serve us. I would like to address these questions in turn.

My responsibilities at The Heritage Foundation comprise supervising all of the foundation's research on public policy concerning foreign policy and national security. Counterterrorism and physical security of key government assets has been a particular Heritage research priority. Over the past decade, we have assembled a robust, talented, and dedicated research team. I have the honor and privilege of leading that team.

Heritage analysts have studied and written authoritatively on virtually every aspect of the challenges of foreign policy and national security. The results of all our research are publicly available on the Heritage Web site at www.heritage.org. We collaborate frequently with the research community, including such institutions the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Aspen Institute, the Center for National Policy, the Hudson Institute, the George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute, and the Strategic Studies Institute and Center for Strategic Leadership at the Army War College. Heritage analysts also serve on a variety of government advisory efforts, including task forces under the Homeland Security Advisory Council and the Advisory Panel on Department of Defense Capabilities for

Support of Civil Authorities. Our research programs are nonpartisan, dedicated to developing policy proposals that will keep the nation safe, free, and prosperous.

I am particularly proud of The Heritage Foundation's long and substantive record of research on counterterrorism and physical security. This effort reflects the foundation's commitment to advancing public policies that enhance our security by thwarting terrorist travel; encouraging economic growth by promoting the legitimate exchange of goods, peoples, services, and ideas among free nations; and fostering a free and open civil society—all at the same time.

Target-Embassy

In December 1967, the U.S. government agreed to turn the defense of Saigon over to the South Vietnamese Army. For that reason, and because the U.S. embassy represented America's presence in that embattled country, after midnight on January 1, 1968, it was a prime target during the surprise Tet Offensive. The television coverage of the fight for the embassy did more than any other image to shake American's faith in Washington's ability to achieve its objectives during the Vietnam War.

A little over a decade later, on the morning of November 4, 1979, the U.S. embassy in Tehran, Iran, was stormed. Fifty-two Americans were taken hostage and held for 444 days. Not only did the U.S. government fail to protect its citizens and suffer a crippling setback to its prestige and foreign policy, but the seizure helped solidify the rule of a totalitarian regime that today represents the single greatest threat to the region and U.S. interests in the Middle East.

No adversary could examine this history and not understand the strategic value of striking at facilities that are both important symbols of American presence and vital centers for representing U.S. interests. Al-Qaeda certainly understands this. Among the first acts in its organized campaign to attack and roll back U.S. influence, were the bombing of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania on August 7, 1998. The attacks killed 258 people and injured more than 5,000.

From the public information that is available, the exact relationship between the Benghazi attack and the broader al-Qaeda-inspired Islamist insurgency is still not clear. But here is what is abundantly clear. We have seen a consistent pattern by al-Qaeda and its affiliates that once they adopt a tactic, they don't abandon it. They study the results. They look to improve and innovate—and they come back and try it again. Witnessing the global attention that the Benghazi attack has attracted, it would be irresponsible not believe that this tactic won't get renewed attention. We have already heard calls from al-Qaeda-affiliated sources for additional attacks on U.S. embassies. The point is, regardless of the motivation and organization behind Benghazi, we should anticipate al-Qaeda and its affiliates will aspire to more such attacks in the future. That means we can't start too soon in preparing to counter such efforts.

Rethinking US Security

After Benghazi, the administration announced an immediate review of security at U.S. diplomatic facilities worldwide. Other efforts are also underway. For example, earlier this month it was reported that the State Department's Office of the Inspector General would undertake two

reviews of the security posture at overseas posts in areas believed prone to violence and terrorism. These are appropriate measures—but they might not be adequate. What standards and judgments are being used to evaluate the efficacy of security? How have they been updated since the 9/11 attacks on Benghazi? What lessons does the government think it has learned?

Appropriately rethinking security at U.S. embassies, consulates, and diplomatic missions may require a new baseline. Is the failure that U.S. agencies were not taking measures they should have, or are there gaps and deficiencies that are now apparent? Here, a full and complete case study of the preparedness and response to the Benghazi attack might be extremely helpful.

Publicly available information provided by U.S. federal agencies and the administration is completely inadequate to conduct an effective case study and offer real insights into systemic issues regarding diplomatic security.

The U.S. State Department has organized an Accountability Review Board (ARB) to assess the circumstances surrounding the Benghazi attack. Whether the ARB or other information provided by the U.S. constitutes the basis for an adequate case study, I believe, hinges on there being full and complete answers to the following four questions. These questions, I believe, are the essential core that must be addressed to ensure the U.S. government has an adequate enterprise in place to meet the threat of armed attacks against U.S. diplomatic facilities.

Counterterrorism and Early Warning

When it comes to protecting U.S. critical infrastructure and key assets, I have often used the phrase “you can’t child proof America.” I think this maxim holds as well as for the hundreds of U.S. diplomatic facilities worldwide. If the U.S. tries to be strong everywhere it will be strong nowhere. Therefore, the most effective means to reduce threats is to address them “before” they strike. We have seen this tactic work effectively in the United States where at least 53 Islamist-inspired terrorists attacks since 9/11 have been thwarted before execution.¹ The best way to diminish an organized terrorist threat is to be proactive and disrupt it before the terrorists have the luxury of deciding when, where, and how to strike.

Thus, the first and perhaps most essential question in regards to the Benghazi attack is: What was done to identify and disrupt organized terrorist operations aimed at U.S. personnel and facilities?

This question is of particular importance because it may provide insights into the effectiveness of the administration’s larger counterterrorism strategy, which it unveiled in 2011. That strategy is heavily focused on disrupting al-Qaeda and its affiliates by targeting leadership entities. At the time, The Heritage Foundation assessment of the strategy was that it was inadequate because it did not take into account that al-Qaeda was more an element of the global Islamist insurgency rather than simply a transnational terrorist network. We believed the U.S. approach was not

¹ Jessica Zuckerman, “Fifty-Third Terror Plot Foiled Since 9/11: Bombing Targets U.S. Financial Hub,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 3758, October 17, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/10/terror-plot-foiled-in-new-york-bombing-targets-us-financial-hub>

sufficiently robust to address the threat.² Understanding U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Libya and their effectiveness may provide key insights into whether the administration's strategy has been put into practice and whether it is working or wanting.

Risk Assessment and Mitigation

Allocating resources for security will always be a challenge for a global power with global responsibility. Applying an appropriate method for evaluating risk and adopting the best combination of risk mitigation measures is an important tool for helping to decide where to apply resources with best effect.

Risk assessments provide objective measures of three factors.³

Threat Assessment Examines what our adversary can accomplish and with what degree of lethality or effect.

Criticality Assessment. Evaluates the effect that will be achieved if the adversary accomplishes his goals. This examines both physical consequences, social and economic disruption, and psychological effects. Not all consequences can be prevented. So in order to assist in prioritization, there is a process designed to identify the criticality of various assets: What is the asset's function or mission and how significant is it?

Vulnerability Assessment. Looks at our vulnerabilities and how they can be mitigated, including weaknesses in structures (both physical and cyber) and other systems/processes that could be exploited by a terrorist. It then asks what options there are to reduce the vulnerabilities identified or, if feasible, eliminate them.

Any evaluation of the preparedness and response for the Benghazi attack has to include a rigorous examination of how the State Department evaluated risk and how it elected to mitigate that risk.

Contingency Planning

Bad things happen. The effectiveness of even the best risk assessments are limited by the completeness of the data and the judgment of those participating in the process. Thus, contingency plans to respond to unforeseen or anticipated threats not easily countered are essential. In order to fully assess the response to the Benghazi attacks it is vital to know (1) what plans were in place, (2) how fully developed and exercised they were, (3) if they were implemented, did they function as anticipated, and if not, why?

² The Heritage Foundation Counterterrorism Task Force, "A Counterterrorism Strategy for the 'Next Wave,'" Heritage Foundation Special Report No. 98, August 24, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/08/a-counterterrorism-strategy-for-the-next-wave>.

³ James Jay Carafano, "Risk and Resiliency: Developing the Right Homeland Security Public Policies for the Post-Bush Era," testimony before the Subcommittee on Transportation Security and Infrastructure Protection, Committee on Homeland Security, U.S. House of Representatives, June 24, 2008, <http://chsdemocrats.house.gov/SiteDocuments/20080625151302-26534.pdf>

Integrated Response

The U.S. presence in any theater usually involves many federal agencies. Some are under the leadership of the ambassador as part of the country team. Others fall under the authority of the regional Combatant Commander. Still, others may be operating under other authorities. Regardless, when a crisis happens their full weight should immediately be brought to bear to protect U.S. lives and the nation's interests. Any complete case study will address the command, control, and coordination of any efforts to organize and integrate efforts to bring all possible resources to bear after it became clear that U.S. personnel in Benghazi were under threat.

Learning and Looking Forward

Many other questions and issues have been raised in regards to the attack and their aftermath. I won't attempt to judge the worthiness of their consideration. What I will say is that unless the administration and the Congress have a full, complete, unvarnished, and accurate answer to these four questions—well, then, if there are lessons to be learned from this tragedy that could help us better prepare for future threats, those lessons may well be lost.

The greatest value of this hearing today will be if this committee can establish the framework that has been filled and commit to relentlessly pursue the facts until that task is done and the lessons not just “learned” but applied.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this vital issue. I look forward to your questions.

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