

Balboni: Does Benghazi attack signify an intelligence failure?

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The attack on the U.S. consulate in [Benghazi, Libya](#), last week was a stark reminder that the world is still a very dangerous place.

Much of the information about the violence, which resulted in the deaths of Ambassador [Chris Stevens](#) and three other Americans, is still developing. Over the weekend, [Susan Rice](#), the U.S. ambassador to the [United Nations](#), maintained that the attack was spontaneous, swirling out of protests over an American-made anti-Islamic video. But there remain indications that it was coordinated and organized, with

interlocking fields of fire during the assault. At the very least, it appears that the attackers had inside information regarding the layout of the consulate and the existence and location of a safe house. That would imply pre-operational surveillance.

And it raises serious questions about U.S. intelligence operations.

The United States operates 16 different intelligence agencies at an estimated cost well in excess of a hundred billion dollars -- the actual number is classified.

Ever since the [9/11 Commission](#) report, the government has placed a premium on effective intelligence to protect U.S. interests at home and abroad. The key agencies are the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) and the [National Security Agency](#). The [CIA](#) uses both human intelligence and electronic surveillance. The [NSA](#) is primarily in the business of intercepting electronic communications. Both agencies have armies of analysts who sift through the gathered information to try to discern where the next threats are coming from.

Intelligence officials will tell you that there is no way that any operation can accurately predict attacks every time across the globe. They'll also say that the main function of intelligence is to provide operating elements within a particular environment "situational awareness," so that the available security resources can be applied effectively.



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But it is fair to ask whether there were warning signs before the violence, which occurred in a nation in governmental turmoil, in a region with a very unstable political environment, and on the anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The Arab Spring has left many governments weak and susceptible to operations of [al-Qaida](#) splinter groups. We know that even though the United States has lopped off the head of al-Qaida central, the remaining elements of the group desperately want a visible success in attacking the United States. In this environment, the guard can never go down. We need to review our diplomatic strategies and see whether we have, consciously or unconsciously, degraded the safety or response capabilities of our embassy security.

In almost all cases, intelligence and security are collaborative enterprises. The governments that host our embassies owe us their protection. Yet, we should ask whether the resources needed to protect this and every other embassy are sufficient and properly utilized. We must continuously assess whether our understanding of the threats within the Middle Eastern environment is commensurate with the security we provide our diplomatic personnel. And we must consider what the realistic expectations are for our intelligence operations.

We have to commit the resources needed to keep our diplomats and foreign service personnel safe. The cost of U.S. diplomacy should not include the death of our citizens.

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