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Embassy Security

From The Outside In

William Young

RAND Office of External Affairs

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Testimony presented before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on November 15, 2012

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Embassy Security
From The Outside In²

Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs
United States House of Representatives

Benghazi and Beyond:
What Went Wrong on September 11, 2012, and
How to Prevent it from Happening at other Frontline Posts

November 15, 2012

Chairwoman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Berman, members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me to appear before you on the issue of embassy security. I would like to offer a way to look at the issue and to show how improvements might be made from the outside-in. Before I start, let me make clear that I have not been to Benghazi and had already left government service by the time the tragic attack occurred there. I offer these views based upon my previous years of experience as a senior CIA officer serving in multiple high-threat environments in the Middle East, and not based upon any particular research I've done while at the RAND Corporation.

We should begin by recognizing that it is not possible to mitigate all risk. When deciding to establish a diplomatic presence in a high-threat area, you need to consider the importance of the mission and the measures needed to protect it. For example, is the mission essential? If so, is it possible to protect the embassy or consulate, as well as the housing areas and routes to and from the offices? If not, then it might be necessary to reconsider your plans.

First and foremost among all security considerations for missions abroad is the amount and type of support provided by the host government. Without local government support, it might not be possible to secure any civilian facility, especially one in a high-threat area.

For example, the host government should be willing to provide a noticeable military presence outside the embassy or consulate as a deterrent to groups contemplating a protest or attack. It

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also should be willing to use barriers to close roads --either completely or in part-- around the facility to increase the degree of "set back" from the street. Not only does this expand the distance between consular buildings and potential vehicle threats, but this will make it more difficult for attack planners to evaluate their target. This is an important deterrent: attackers often have to spend days and sometimes weeks up front casing the buildings, studying the daily movement of people in and around the target area, and evaluating the security procedures in place at the target compounds. Their inability to see inside the embassy or consulate compound --created by this increased "set back"-- raises the level of uncertainty for them and could convince them not to attack or alternatively to seek a more visibly accessible target elsewhere.

The host government, through its police, its intelligence service, or local militias, should also provide intelligence gained from its penetrations of terrorist groups and fringe elements. Such information would help embassy staff increase their level of awareness, and strengthen the security posture both of the adjacent facilities as well as the movement of its officers in the city.

Building on the security foundation provided by the host government, the second most important consideration when developing a strategy to protect a diplomatic mission in a high-threat area is the method for acquiring knowledge of what is happening outside the embassy's fence line on the streets in the surrounding neighborhoods. People are creatures of habit and move about their daily business with purpose to and from their workplaces and around their homes. Shop owners and neighbors know what their streets look like on a normal day and often know when to stay home on the day of a protest or a terrorist attack. They can often tell when strangers are present and could provide critical information in advance of an attack or as groups mobilize for a protest. This type of information can be collected daily by roving patrols in surrounding areas and by reliable local investigators who have established relationships within the neighborhoods around the embassy. Since the information is likely to be disjointed, the Regional Security Office (RSO) would have to set up a mechanism by which the information could be processed and disseminated quickly enough to ensure early warning that allows the embassy staff time to set emergency action plans in motion. Many RSOs already have regular contact with their counterparts in the police, who should be willing to provide daily situation reports about what is being said and what is happening on nearby streets.

A third consideration when developing an effective security strategy would be the actual structure of the buildings and layout of the diplomatic compound. Is the embassy an "Inman" structure with blast-resistant walls and glass with significant set-back from the street? Or is it a former residence or set of buildings in a housing compound that has not yet been hardened against attack? In high-threat areas where the United States is immediately required to have a presence to work

with a new local government, there often is no time to wait for the construction crews to arrive. Building a new embassy or consulate can take years.

In the meantime, it would be important to collaborate with the host government to immediately build up the security outside the embassy while guards, locks, gates and procedures are put in place to establish access control and safe havens for protection inside the compound.

A small detachment of U.S. Marines, part of the Marine Corps Embassy Security Group, is often present to protect documents and information systems, but the protocol governing their ability to engage with attackers outside the chancery and other main buildings is limited. There is a need to review the rules governing the role of Marine Corps security guards—particularly in the event of an emergency—should the Marines be required to engage with attackers inside an embassy or consulate compound before they enter the chancery or main buildings.

If the threat of a large military style attack is credible, then additional protective security inside the diplomatic compound will be necessary. The perimeter security provided by the local government, however, could serve as a deterrent to attackers, who, realizing that an assault could be repelled, might choose a softer target. After all, their resources are not limitless. They too need to be mindful of the costs of losing too many people. The physical-security measures in place at the mission, therefore need to be designed with this in mind. Their primary purpose is to deter.

Technology can help. Cameras with pattern-recognition software positioned around the embassy to monitor the streets can ascertain what those streets look like on a normal day and what they look like on a day when there will be protests or an attack. On the day of an incident, protesters need to mobilize or attackers need to preposition themselves before the assault. This preparation can be identified by the cameras and software.

Similarly, predictive analytics can be applied to social media collected from Facebook, Twitter, and other accounts to determine ahead of time when crowds might form or when an attack is being planned. Although social media might not be able to uncover the actual identities of the attackers, it could bring to light certain disparate pieces of information, which when analyzed and linked could provide early warning of a threat. For example, local residents and shop owners know by word of mouth not to be on the street or to have their shops open after lunch tomorrow. They may talk about it either in face-to-face meetings and/or on their Facebook pages. The embassy won't know the reason why the shops will be closed but can use this indication of possible unrest to probe further within the community by asking its contacts.

The intensity of the language used on blogs and in Twitter feeds also can be measured to provide further early warning of public sentiment on the same day. This type of foresight can help clarify the nature of the threat and convince security officers in the mission to take appropriate measures to deal with the problem ahead of time. Discussing the matter with the local government might be sufficient to head off an otherwise potentially ugly event. The local government, for example, could intervene and prevent a nascent mob from growing and getting too close to the embassy. Once a mob forms or the terrorists are in place, it is much more difficult to stop or even limit a violent protest or attack.

Technology can help even at the point that the protest or assault threatens to breach the outer wall of the diplomatic compound. Long Range Acoustic Devices (LRAD) configured appropriately and placed either around the outside of the embassy or inside the compound but outside the main buildings are a non-lethal way to deter attacks, prevent damage, and save lives. This same technology can be configured for the bottom of armored vehicles to protect embassy officers in transit. This version of the device, known as SoundBarrier, presents an enduring blast of sound against an attacker which creates the audio equivalent of standing behind a jet engine on takeoff. Crowds attacking an embassy car or trying to breach a perimeter wall will be driven back by the sound. Those inside the car or inside the vehicle will remain unaffected because the sound is emitted only in an outward direction.

Other, lower tech options also can be brought into play. For example, wire mesh screening installed above the embassy compound could serve as a shield to force some rockets to pre-detonate above their targets. Plywood placed inside windows that are not made of protective glass or that have no mylar covering can be used to protect personnel from shrapnel and flying debris after an explosion. There are several similar low-cost measures that can be used at temporary or new, makeshift facilities where a diplomatic presence is required before proper security can be put in place.

All of the measures discussed above can improve the security and the ability of diplomats to function in a high-threat or otherwise hostile environment. No amount of security, however, short of the type of military presence found in actual war zones can defend against a large, well-armed terrorist attack. There are no guarantees under any scenario that security can be one hundred percent effective. When entering a high-threat area, diplomats and those who support them agree to accept some degree of risk. As mentioned earlier, the best approach is to weigh the importance of the mission against how much of the risk can be mitigated. One of the best ways to lower the level of risk is to focus on shaping the way the local population and would-be protesters and attackers view the embassy, its staff, and their movements. If they can be

convinced that the costs of violence are too high, because of the visible presence of local military and police units or some of the other measures noted above, then they will seek out targets that are more acceptable.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today and share my observations. I would be happy to take questions.