

To Kill a Diplomat: The Modern Mechanics of a Tragedy

Written by Ivaylo Iaydjiev

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IVAYLO IAYDJIEV, SEP 16 2012

It is hard to imagine a more senseless loss of life. On the 11th anniversary of 9/11, US Ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens, Information Management Officer Sean Smith, and security personnel Glen Doherty and Tyrone Woods were killed in Benghazi, the no-fly haven and birthplace of the Libyan revolution. In a country, where people proudly waved American flags next to the new Libyan ones. The story at first hand is a depressingly familiar one: a movie gets made, it mocks Islam, and this draws large crowds to attack US embassies and consulates around the Middle East. Currently the list stands with Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, Sudan, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Bahrain, Qatar, and even Malaysia, Pakistan, Iraq, and Bangladesh.

Probably the best analysis, however, has come from FP's Middle East Channel, which deals with most dimensions of the attacks. Additionally, I agree that in the wake of such tragedies reactions count a lot – and while the Libyans struck the right tone by marginalizing and condemning unequivocally, as a government and as a society, the perpetrators of the attacks, the Egyptians seem to be playing a political game over the issue. All this analysis is pretty comprehensive and up to scratch; however I think it is worth trying to understand way the different ingredients worked together to produce this tragedy. I will thus focus on the analytical *mechanics* of the tragedy; or what in IR jargon might be called middle-range analysis (in between the micro specifics of the Benghazi context and the macro analytical framework for the event of the Arab Spring/dangers of diplomacy-type).

But there are more elements to this than that. First, it was a classic black swan event – one which was unpredictable, has significant repercussions, and will then be rationalized looking backward as “we should've seen this coming” (and we've started doing this already). It's a demonstration that we suck at anticipating risk – what makes this even more emotionally moving is that it occurs in a country, which has all but welcomed Americans (and the “West”) as liberators just months earlier. So who would have predicted a 1979 Iranian scenario in such a context?

Second, networks. Without Pastor Terry Jones picking up and promoting this...well...piece of crap, it wouldn't have scaled up that quickly. This is an unfortunate testament to power of cue-givers in the era of informational oversaturation. Most likely, however, this movie was also trumped up in circles in host countries; indeed, probably cue-givers/central nodes in extremist organizations just talked about the movie and didn't even play it to their followers. Finally, it's only a network that can organize this powerful mob to come together and overrun security forces at such short notice. Note: networks are not good or bad, but using them makes them so.

This brings me to my third point: information flows in an interconnected global village. It's all about *speed* and *visibility*. Internet technologies have, unfortunately, made this tragedy possible by allowing an obscure filmmaker to post a video on Youtube which would provoke such violent reactions. At no time in previous human history (and this is not just a turn of phrase), something happening in North America has had such a fast and direct repercussion in North Africa and the Middle East. Information is uncontrollable despite what North Korean leaders might believe.

But let's be clear: it's not just about the movie. Clearly, mob mentality played a key role in first mobilizing, then firing up, and finally driving those people gathered to storm the embassies. The deaths of the Ambassador and his security detail however look more and more like the work of a coordinated attack which took advantage of the mass rallies as

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a cover. Come on, even in the current fragile Libya without extensive state control it's not *that* straightforward to find and then fire grenade launchers (and hit your target). There are clear-cut perpetrators who targeted the Ambassador; his death was not in the hands of an out of control mob. Those perpetrators should be brought to justice and President Obama is doing everything possible to find them.

There are also ideational factors. First, again this is a sad testament to the power of identity entrepreneurs, who mobilize differences in order to serve their purposes by dividing people and stocking up violence. These identity entrepreneurs blur the lines between nations and individuals, turning diplomats into a "legitimate" target just by their allegiance to the same imagined community as the perpetrator of the offense. This unwarranted identity generalization has direct consequences, and we should remember this when we talk about "the Muslims" in assigning blame for these events.

Finally, the elephant in the room – the role of religion. By this I do not mean Christianity vs. Islam, but the much more powerful idea of the "mindset of the believer". It is only by seeing the movie from the perspective of a dedicated believer that we can begin to phantom how such a film without any merits can provoke such a powerful and intense reaction. It's not about rationality or irrationality, it's about a way of 'feeling' the world. And it can go both ways – one of the most important tenets of all world religions is hospitality to strangers and foreigners, which can counteract the influence of identity entrepreneurs.

In conclusion, this tragedy has an unmistakably 21st century feeling to it. Such a black swan event wouldn't be possible without new communication technologies, the power of networks, or the ideational dynamics of our era. It is a reminder that diplomacy is not just dinner parties, but involves very real risks, to the extent that there is now a clear trend of securitizing diplomacy. If this trend follows the dynamics of the "War on Terror", what can happen is that security concerns can overshadow the flexibility and visibility which is an essential ingredient of diplomacy as representation. Yet, on the most human level, this remains a senseless loss of life due to human stupidity and bigotry – reinforced by the 21st century environment.

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