

**On the same day America remembered the 2011 destruction of New York's World Trade Center, a U.S. ambassador and three others are killed and two American diplomatic buildings in the Middle East are attacked. Coincidence – or design?**

The U.S. dispatched an elite group of Marines along with two warships to Tripoli, Libya on Wednesday following a mob attack that killed the U.S. ambassador to Libya and three other Americans.

Egyptian protesters climb the walls of the U.S. Embassy while others chant anti-U.S. slogans during a protest in Cairo, Egypt, Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2012. (AP PHOTO/NASSER NASSE)

U.S. officials are investigating whether the violence – initially blamed on an anti-Islamic video – was a terrorist attack planned to coincide with the anniversary of 9/11.

Building overrun

Libya's interior minister said Wednesday that the U.S. ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, was killed when armed Islamists overran the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya's second largest city, in a day of rage that also struck the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, where demonstrators hauled down the American flag, tore it to pieces and burned it.

Originally, Obama administration officials believed that the incidents were sparked by outrage over the release of a movie trailer that conservative Muslims in both countries said denigrated Islam and its holiest figure, Mohammed. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged that as the likely cause in a statement.

"Some have sought to justify this vicious behavior as a response to inflammatory material posted on the Internet. The United States deplores any intentional effort to denigrate the religious beliefs of others," she said. "But let me be clear: There is never any justification for violent acts of this kind."

But a U.S. counterterrorism official told the Associated Press (AP) that the Benghazi violence was “too coordinated or professional” to be spontaneous. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the incident publicly.

The FBI was sending evidence teams to Libya, a law enforcement official told the AP.

### Jones involved again

Backers of the movie include Egyptian Christian activist Morris Sadek and Terry Jones, the Florida pastor whose burning of Qurans last year led to days of rioting in Afghanistan. They were unapologetic about the role their film may have had in triggering the violence.

Islam forbids any depiction of Mohammed because he's seen as someone whose greatness can't be replicated. In documentaries about his life, he's often portrayed as a ray of light. That someone would mock the prophet is considered blasphemous.

President Hamid Karzai on Wednesday condemned the film, galvanizing fears that his denunciation could be read as a go-ahead to stage violent protests.

A condemnation from Karzai was thought to have inflamed passions in the spring of 2010, after Jones and his followers staged a Koran-burning. Nearly two weeks elapsed without any reaction in Afghanistan, until Karzai issued a call for Jones' arrest and prosecution. The next day, April 1, a mob descended on the U.N. mission in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, killing seven foreign U.N. workers.

### Fundamentalist takeover?

Even without the provocation provided by the film, the violence fit a pattern of growing fundamentalist ferment that has touched many of the countries where governments have fallen in the past 18 months.

That trend has been especially pronounced in Libya, where in recent weeks conservative Islamists have leveled mosques and cemeteries associated with the moderate Sufi strain of Islam, and car bombs have become increasingly frequent in Tripoli, the capital, and Benghazi.

The administration, Clinton said, will continue supporting the Libyan government as it struggles to surmount serious insecurity in the aftermath of the civil war that overthrew strongman Moammar Gadhafi.

### 'Thank yous to Obama'

Stevens' death marked the loss of one of the State Department's best Libyan experts and threatened to mar relations between the United States and Libya's nascent government. He was

perhaps the most celebrated ambassador in the Middle East, well known and respected among Libya's 6 million people.

Throughout Twitter and Facebook, popular Libyan sites first created during the uprisings mourned his loss and said that his death was no way to defend Islam.

"I'm shocked," one Arab diplomat who knew Stevens said, asking that he not be identified by name because he was not authorized to discuss the issue. "Immediately after the collapse of the (Gadhafi) regime, there were U.S. flags everywhere and thank yous to Obama. But in one incident, things have turned worse than before."

### No easy road

Middle East analysts warn of a tough slog ahead. The transition to democracy for any country is rarely without upheaval, said Allen Keiswetter, a scholar at the Middle East Institute and a former deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs.

"It's going to take time for the Western idea of freedom of speech and religious tolerance to take hold in these countries," he said. Libya in particular, he noted, had no tradition of democratic governance. "Democratizing countries are among the most violent as they work through their systems," he said.

Stabilization could take years "and as much as a generation," said P.J. Crowley, a former State Department spokesman under Obama and a former special assistant for national security affairs under President Bill Clinton.

"It was clear when Moammar Gadhafi was overthrown and the U.S. and NATO assisted in that effort that Libya was likely to be a very unstable place that radical Islamist elements were going to exploit," said Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute. The Obama administration isn't the first to "barge into regions" without understanding all the players and their motivations, he added.

Carpenter said he doesn't believe it was clear that the administration "understood the probable consequences" of getting rid of Gadhafi.

### 'Overly optimistic'

"There's been a tendency both with the Bush administration and Obama – and Clinton in the Balkans – to be overly optimistic about the probable aftermath of getting rid of obnoxious regimes," he said. "There's a significant risk that the situation may become very chaotic and be worse than the status quo. You have deep divisions in that society; it's still very much uncertain whether Libya will remain cohesive."

Anthony Cordesman, a national security analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a center-right think tank, warned in a blog posting against drawing conclusions too rapidly.

“We in the West need to remember that the ‘European spring’ that began with the French Revolution (or 1848 depending on your choice of historians) triggered upheavals that lasted until at least 1914, and did not end in anything approaching stability,” he wrote.