



Did the U.S. embassy in Cairo make an apology?

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Mitt Romney addresses the killing of U.S. embassy officials in Benghazi, Libya, while speaking in Jacksonville, Fla., on Sept. 12, 2012.

The breach of the U.S. embassy in Cairo and the deaths of Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other diplomats in Libya prompted a clash in the American presidential campaign over whether a statement by the Cairo embassy was an apology.

Just hours after the first details emerged about the Libya attack, Republican Mitt Romney criticized the Obama administration for appearing weak.

"The embassy in Cairo put out a statement after their grounds had been breached," Romney told reporters. "Protesters were inside the grounds. They reiterated that statement after the breach. I think it's a terrible course for America to stand in apology for our values. That instead, when our grounds are being attacked and being breached, that the first response of the United States must be outrage at the breach of the sovereignty of our nation. An apology for America's values is never the right course."

During this news conference, Romney repeated variations of "apology" five more times. He called the Cairo embassy statement "akin to apology," called it an effort to "apologize for American values," said it was "effectively apologizing for the right of free speech," and described it as "what appeared to be an apology for American principles."

This is a theme for Romney: He has long accused Obama of apologizing for America, starting in 2010, when Romney published *No Apology: The Case for American Greatness*. Since then, he has repeatedly criticized what he has called an "apology tour" by Obama shortly after he took office. PolitiFact has examined those speeches, consulted experts on speechmaking and apologies, and rated Romney's claim *Pants on Fire*.

The situation in Libya and Egypt is still developing, and details about what happened are still emerging. But we wanted to examine Romney's statements and help readers put them in perspective, based on what we know of the timeline of events.

What the Cairo embassy said

According to media reports, the U.S. embassy in Cairo released a statement at 6:17 a.m. East Coast time on Sept. 11, 2012, amid growing anger in Egypt about an obscure Web video with a highly negative portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad -- a video that, given past experiences with depictions of Muhammad, seemed likely to spark protests.

The statement condemned the video:

"The Embassy of the United States in Cairo condemns the continuing efforts by misguided individuals to hurt the religious feelings of Muslims – as we condemn efforts to offend believers of all religions. Today, the 11th anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, Americans are honoring our patriots and those who serve our nation as the fitting response to the enemies of democracy. Respect for religious beliefs is a cornerstone of American democracy. We firmly reject the actions by those who abuse the universal right of free speech to hurt the religious beliefs of others."

About four hours later, crowds began to form and over the next several hours, the protesters stormed the embassy compound, destroyed a U.S. flag and replaced it with an Islamic flag. About three hours later, according to the Washington Examiner, the embassy tweeted, "This morning's condemnation (issued before protest began) still stands. As does our condemnation of unjustified breach of the Embassy." (This tweet has disappeared from the Embassy Twitter feed.)

That night in Libya, militants attacked U.S. facilities in Benghazi, eventually killing the four diplomats. The news of the deaths was not announced by the U.S. government until after 7:00 a.m. East Coast time on Sept. 12.

Around 10:30 p.m., Romney released a statement that said in part, "It's disgraceful that the Obama administration's first response was not to condemn attacks on our diplomatic missions, but to sympathize with those who waged the attacks."

At a 10:15 a.m. press conference, Romney offered the remarks we quoted above, in which he used the term "apology" or a variation on seven occasions.

Also that morning, ABC News reported that the White House was distancing itself from the Cairo statement. "An administration official tells ABC News that 'no one in Washington approved that statement before it was released and it doesn't reflect the views of the U.S. government,'" ABC News reported.

Who knew what, and when

In assessing Romney's remarks and whether the embassy statement was an apology, it's important to understand a few details.

First, the U.S. embassy released its statement at least several hours before protesters stormed the U.S. compound in Cairo -- and well before the attack in Libya took place. So the statement was not made in response to the storming of the Cairo embassy, nor to the killings in Benghazi.

It's possible, however, that protesters had already amassed at the embassy by the time the statement was released; that's not clear from the media reports we've seen. And there are reports, not backed up by the current embassy Twitter feed, that the embassy did reiterate the original statement via Twitter several hours after the embassy was breached.

Second, Romney's initial statement on the evening of Sept. 11 calling the administration's response "disgraceful" was made with knowledge of how the Cairo incident ended, but before the full details in Libya had emerged. On the other hand, significant details about both events were available by the time he made his comments on the morning of Sept. 12.

And third, the ABC News report suggests that even the White House was having jitters about the embassy statement after the fact, saying that it didn't reflect the views of the U.S. government.

Later, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney released a quote from President Obama that said, "I think most Americans, Democrats or Republicans, understand that there are times where we set politics aside, and one of those is when we've got a direct threat to American personnel who are overseas. And so I think that if you look at how most Republicans have reacted, most elected officials, they've reacted responsibly, waiting to find out the facts before they talked, making sure that our number-one priority is the safety and security of American personnel.

"It appears that Governor Romney didn't have his facts right," Obama told an interviewer from 60 Minutes. "The situation in Cairo was one in which an embassy that is being threatened by major protests releases a press release saying that the film that had disturbed so many Muslims around the world wasn't representative of what Americans believe about Islam, in an effort to cool the situation down. It didn't come from me, it didn't come from Secretary Clinton; it came from folks on the ground who are potentially in danger. And my tendency is to cut folks a little bit of slack when they're in that circumstance, rather than try to question their judgment from the comfort of a campaign office."

Ilya Shapiro, a constitutional law scholar at the libertarian Cato Institute, told PolitiFact that "the embassy statement was disgraceful appeasement of Islamic radicals. The only thing that needs 'fact-checking' is the extent to which (the statement) reflects administration policy."

We didn't receive a response from the Romney campaign, but a senior foreign policy advisor to the Romney campaign -- Richard Williamson, former ambassador to the United Nations for special political affairs -- addressed the issue during an interview with Andrea Mitchell on MSNBC on Sept. 12.

"The fact is, the substance of what the governor said last night was true," Williamson said. "He continues to stand by it. We shouldn't be on an apology tour, but rather be aggressive in

condemning this breach of sovereign American soil. We should be defending our principles, our free speech in pluralism."

He added, "The substance of what the governor said last night was true then and it's true now. The American people have a choice to make, and it's between an administration that apologizes for our values and principles and someone who stands up for it ... someone who leads from behind which contributed to the turmoil and someone who wants to lead from the front."

What three apology experts say

To explore whether the statement represented an apology, we sent it to the four experts we interviewed for our previous fact-check on Romney's claim about Obama's apology tour. Here are the comments of the three who responded:

- John Murphy, a communications professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who studies presidential rhetoric and political language, said Romney was wrong to label it an apology.

"First, the statement does not use the word 'apology' or 'apologize' and does not use any synonym for that word. There is no statement here that says, 'We are sorry.'

"Second, the grammar of the statement condemns the actions of a third party. An apology, to be pedantic, is when the first party says to the second party, 'I have offended you and I am sorry.' This statement condemns a third party -- misguided individuals -- that does not officially represent the United States. The term 'individuals' dissociates them from the U.S. Therefore, it's impossible to say that this is an apology from the U.S. to anyone.

"Third, the statement does not apologize for the right of free speech; it affirms it. It condemns those who abuse the right of free speech, but it claims that this is a universal right, as is religious toleration. So, the statement does not like what the misguided individuals said and did, but recognizes they have a right to do it."

"It's a condemnation," Murphy said, "not an apology."

- Lauren Bloom, an attorney and business consultant who wrote *The Art of the Apology*, said that Romney is "once again allowing his emotional allergy to apology to interfere with his judgment."

Bloom said that "if there's anything more central to American values than respecting each individual's right to worship as he or she pleases, I'd be hard-pressed to say what it might be. The statement that 'respect for religious beliefs is a cornerstone of American democracy' not only is true, but is as clear an expression of one of our most cherished values as I can imagine."

She said the embassy statement is "not an apology -- quite the contrary, it's a confirmation that the American people recognize the right to worship freely and will not accept religious bullying in the name of free speech. To say that someone who deliberately insults others in the name of religion has acted wrongly isn't an apology -- it's simply a recognition that those insults go too far."

- Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, a professor who studies international human rights and maintains the website Political Apologies and Reparations, a database of documents on apologies, said the statement is "not an apology."

Rather, she said, "it is a condemnation of 'abuse' of the universal value of free speech. A condemnation is not an apology. ... The Embassy statement also reaffirms two American values: the American value of respect for religious beliefs and the American value of democracy."