

## **HOW DID AMERICA REACT TO THE ATTACK IN BENGHAZI?**

The dissemination on *Youtube* of extracts of the Arab language version of the polemical film “Innocence of Muslims” set off an unprecedented outburst of anti-American feelings in the Arab-Muslim world. At the time of writing, no one is able to confirm the existence of the film, which was supposed to have been directed and produced by a Copt residing in the United States: Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, also known under the pseudonym of Sam Bacile. The accusations of blasphemy brought against him have nonetheless been at the source of hundreds of extremist demonstrations directed against Western diplomatic representations since 11 September. Starting from Egypt and Libya, this wave of violence has reached the entire Arab-Muslim world and today has repercussions even in European capitals.

The most violent riots took place in Tunis, Khartoum and Islamabad, leading to clashes with the security forces and to the evacuation of the families of diplomats and of non-essential staff at American embassies and consulates. On Friday, 21 September, the Pakistani government declared a national holiday in the hope of avoiding new violence and to allow the whole country to affirm its love for the Prophet Mohammed. However, the most tragic event to occur since the start of the crisis remains the death of the American ambassador in Libya, Christopher Stevens, killed by rocket fire against the United States consulate in Benghazi on the night of September 11 to 12.

### **Was Benghazi assault a planned terrorist attack?**

The death of Chris Stevens, the first American ambassador killed at his post since Adolph Dubs in Kabul in 1979, has raised many questions and certain confusion in Washington. The spokesman of the White House, Jay Carney, has indicated that he does not have any proof that the attack was premeditated by terrorist group. When questioned by the Senate’s Committee on Homeland Security, the director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Matthew Olsen, contradicted this statement, saying that the attack had not been improvised and had no doubt been perpetrated by a group linked to al-Qaeda or to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI). According to Senator Joseph Lieberman, Chairman of the Committee, the event proves that the terrorist organization still constitutes a threat for the United States.

According to CNN, Ambassador Stevens himself was concerned when he saw his name on an al-Qaeda “black list”. He also warned the government repeatedly of the rising risk of terrorist attacks in the region of Benghazi. Many observers have put the blame on the Salafi militia Ansar Al Sharia. This group, which had not given up its arms after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, controls many strategic positions in Cyrenaica, where it wants to establish an Islamic state. Ansar Al-Sharia denies any involvement in the death of Chris Stevens to avoid an American military strike against it. However, we should note that the conditions of the attack match its modus operandi. Moreover, Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri called for

vengeance in Libya after the death of the terrorist Abu Yahya al-Libi in a U.S. drone strike on June 4 in North-West Pakistan.

### **Intrusion in the presidential campaign**

Suspicious of the involvement of al-Qaeda in the attack could become hinder the reelection campaign of Barack Obama, who focused a large part of his message on foreign policy around the death of Ossama Bin Laden. The accusations of weakness launched by his Republican challenger Mitt Romney after the first demonstrations in Cairo were rejected for their hastiness and their clumsiness, when the death of Chris Steven was officially announced. In the end, the fear of new terrorist attacks against American interests could nonetheless put in question the determination to achieve a rapprochement with the Muslim world which Obama has demonstrated since his election in 2008.

Many senior politicians have already called for the cancellation of economic and financial assistance to countries where anti-American speech and actions are spreading. Senator Rand Paul, a figure at the head of the “Tea Party” movement, has sponsored a motion to block aid to Libya, Egypt and Pakistan. He accuses these countries of playing a “double game” and of putting national security in danger. This measure is rejected by the Democratic majority of the Senate. However, any deterioration of the situation may lead to a radicalization of the American political discourse and to new controversies over the need for engagement with the Muslim world, especially in case of a shift of power after the November elections.

### **Risk for relations between the United States and the Muslim world**

The conflagration caused by the “Innocence of Muslims” has given prominence to international policy in a presidential campaign which up to now was concentrating exclusively on socio-economic problems. In the view of the Republicans, the present crisis confirms the need to rebuild American leadership, which was undermined by the outgoing administration. An U.S. advertising campaign featuring Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton on Pakistani television has already been used by the Republicans to support accusations of weakness made by Mitt Romney.

The current crisis thus may leave long-lasting traces in the relations between the United States and the Muslim world, which have already been eroded by the drone strikes in Pakistan, the bogging down of the Middle East peace negotiations and the tensions with Iran. Many Muslim countries have considered excessive the alerts issued by the State Department and the evacuation of some of the staff of the embassies. In the same way, targeted strikes against Salafi militia in Libya would touch off new waves of anger, despite the commitment of the Libyan authorities to go after those responsible for the attack in Benghazi. Considering all of this, the symbolic weight of the death of an ambassador should prompt Barack Obama to show greater firmness so as to avoid falling into the trap of “Carterisation” which Mitt Romney is trying to draw him into at all costs.