

Parsing out the statistic of '600 requests' from Benghazi for better security



The Fact Checker
GLENN KESSLER

"Look at Benghazi, our ambassador. He wired her 500 or 600 times asking for help."
— Donald Trump, interview on Fox News, Sunday, Dec. 13

We're using this Donald Trump quote as a jumping-off point to explore a figure that has been widely cited since the House Select Committee on Benghazi held a hearing in October featuring former secretary of state Hillary Clinton — that there were "600 requests" for security upgrades from U.S. officials based in Benghazi, Libya.

As usual, Trump wildly exaggerated the figure. A key point that Republicans on the committee have tried to make was that Ambassador Chris Stevens — who perished in the 2012 attacks on U.S. facilities that left three others dead — did not directly communicate with Clinton on her private email system. (Generally, ambassadors would send messages through the chain of command.) So none of these came directly from Stevens to Clinton, "asking for help," as Trump put it.

Yet Trump is not alone. Few in the media or the political world have understood what this figure is supposed to mean, and in fact have almost always described it incorrectly. The Fact Checker has spent several weeks exploring this figure with both Republican and Democratic staffs of the Benghazi panel and was given a rare opportunity to examine aspects of the underlying data. This is the result of our inquiry.

The Facts

Let's first stipulate that there is no debate that security was inadequate in Benghazi. Four Americans died. Even the State Department Accountability Review Board (ARB) report that many Republicans say is a whitewash is unsparring in its

portrait of Washington's indifference to the crumbling security situation. The report said the security posture was "grossly inadequate" to deal with the attacks, noting that repeated requests for additional security staff and equipment went unheeded by Washington.

But the ARB report offers no count of the requests, which is why the committee's count of 600 has sparked so much attention.

But while GOP members often have frequently shorthanded the information as "600 requests," the correct phraseology is "requests and concerns." That is how the figure is expressed on a chart that was displayed during the hearing.

A "concern," however, is different from a "request."

"A request is made via email or cable for physical security, equipment, or something related to the compound itself (lighting, barriers, wire, etc.)," a GOP congressional staff member explained. "Weeks or months later, the same unresolved issue is brought up again in a discussion. That's a request and a concern. In general, concerns followed requests. However, some concerns are independent of a request. Such concerns could, for example, be expressed about the delay of issuing visas to DS agents kept out of Libya. Concerns could be expressed about security personnel needing to provide their own holsters or protective gear, etc."

Requests, meanwhile, were about any specific security-related need in Benghazi. A request for hundreds of sandbags would count as one request.

Officials could not provide a breakdown of the number of requests vs. the number of concerns. Left unstated is the fact that at least some of these requests were actually fulfilled. The chart suggests the security posture — in terms of the number of security officers — never improved. But it's an apples-and-oranges comparison. Most of the requests and concerns appear not to be about staffing, but about



GOP presidential candidate Donald Trump and others have claimed that there were "600 requests" for security upgrades at the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, before the September 2012 attacks.

other security upgrades. The ARB acknowledged that a number of requested upgrades did take place in 2012.

Many media reports, however, have incorrectly stated that officials in Benghazi made 600 requests for security to Washington — and that all of those requests were denied. Megyn Kelly of Fox News, for instance, asked, "Why would 600 requests for security [be] ignored?" Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) wrote a newspaper opinion article that stated: "600 requests for additional security were submitted from Libya, all of which were denied by then-Secretary Clinton's State Department."

One reason that people might have been confused is that the phrase "requests and concerns" appeared only on the chart. During the hearing, for instance, Rep. Mike Pompeo (R-Kan.) repeatedly referred to 600 "security requests."

"The chart was displayed in the hearing when the numbers were discussed, so all of the media and

anyone else in the room could see it," said the GOP staff member. "We also provided it to anyone who asked for a copy. As I'm sure you understand, members are often rushed when asking questions due to the limited time allotted them. Since Pompeo was discussing the numbers on the chart when it was right there for everyone to see, there was clearly no intent to mislead."

Democrats on the committee say that Republicans have not shared their methodology for counting the requests and concerns. Democratic staffers tried to reconstruct the 600 figure by reviewing cables, emails and other documents but say they were not able to identify fewer than 200 specific requests. But as noted before, a substantial number of the 600 figure could be what the GOP staff labeled as concerns.

To demonstrate that the 600 figure was based on a count of actual documents, the GOP staff permitted the Fact Checker to view a spreadsheet showing the date each document was created, the subject line and "Bates

number" — the official State Department coding of the document. We were not permitted to view the sender and receiver. We also could not publicly disclose the subject headings or the Bates numbers.

The number of documents added up to 581, and staff members said classified documents would bring it over 600. Quite a few documents had the same subject heading; we counted, in one case, 17 with the exact same subject heading. This indicated that concerns were being discussed, as opposed to new requests.

Obviously, the tagging of requests and specifically of concerns is somewhat subjective. A more instructive list might be of unfulfilled requests. The committee's final report is supposed to list the documents that formed the basis for the 600 figure, allowing people to understand exactly how this number was developed. We are satisfied the GOP staff assembled this list in good faith, notwithstanding how many may have mischaracterized it.

"The committee's report will lay out the information it has gathered about security requests and concerns made by U.S. personnel in Libya and Washington in the months preceding the Benghazi terrorist attacks," said committee spokesman Matt Wolking. "As even the State Department itself has admitted, 'Washington . . . fail[ed] to meet Benghazi's repeated requests,' leaving security there 'grossly inadequate' in terms of both equipment and staffing. The committee's chart accurately showed that while requests and concerns dramatically increased, the number of security agents was virtually unchanged."

The Pinocchio Test

As we noted, there is no dispute that security was inadequate in Benghazi and that the State Department failed to respond to all requests for security. But the shorthand description of "600 requests" has left a misleading impression — so much so that many reporters and lawmakers appear to believe that all of these requests were ignored. As Trump indicated, some people may believe these were all requests from Ambassador Stevens, even though few, if any, are likely from Stevens.

But the committee is counting "requests and concerns." At least some of the requests were actually fulfilled — and the counting of "concerns" may be subject to dispute.

We look forward to more fully reviewing the record when the final report is released. Trump's comment, of course, is a whopper. But in the meantime, reporters or lawmakers who fail to note that this is not simply a list of unfulfilled requests, but a more subjective accounting of requests and concerns, will earn Two Pinocchios.



Obama to make the first visit of his presidency to a U.S. mosque this week

BY MICHELLE BOORSTEIN AND JULIET EILPERIN

President Obama will make his first visit during his presidency to a U.S. mosque, the White House announced Saturday, part of the administration's push to promote religious tolerance at a time when rhetoric linking Islam with terrorism is growing.

On Wednesday, the president will visit the Islamic Society of Baltimore, a sprawling community center in the city's western suburbs that provides thousands of people with a place of worship, a housing complex and schools, according to its website. It is one of the Mid-Atlantic region's largest Muslim centers and describes itself as aspiring "to be the anchor of a growing Muslim community with diverse backgrounds, democratically gov-

erned, relating to one another with inclusiveness and tolerance, and interacting with neighbors in an Islamic exemplary manner."

The president is making the visit "to celebrate the contributions Muslim Americans make to our nation and reaffirm the importance of religious freedom to our way of life," a White House official wrote in an email Saturday. "As the President has said, Muslim Americans are our friends, and neighbors; our co-workers, and sports heroes — and our men and women in uniform defending our country."

The official added that the event, coming just days after Obama spoke out against anti-Semitism and right before his appearance at the National Prayer breakfast, amounts to "reaching out to our fellow

Americans to let them know we're here for each other, regardless of where they come from, or what they look like, or what faith they practice. This is a message the President wants every American — of all faiths — to hear."

At the Islamic Society, Obama will hold a roundtable discussion with community members, the official said.

The visit will be part of the tightrope-walking with Islam Obama has done during his presidency.

For years, Muslim Americans have lobbied him to visit a mosque, citing Islamophobia. At the same time, a segment of Obama's critics have said since he took office that he is a Muslim pretending to be Christian and that he plays down the religious aspect of Muslim extremism. Recent polls show that 29 percent

of Americans and nearly 45 percent of Republicans think he is a Muslim.

The visit comes in the last year of his presidency.

The possibility of a mosque visit came up again a month ago, when several prominent Muslim Americans met with senior White House officials to discuss concerns about rising hostility toward people of their faith. During that session, the Islamic leaders asked for Obama to visit a mosque, ideally with former president George W. Bush.

Presidents rarely visit houses of worship, aside from their own religious practices. Obama regularly attends religious services on key holidays. In May, he visited a synagogue for the first time as president.

In 2001, Bush visited the Islamic Mosque and Cultural Cen-

ter of Washington, six days after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, where he declared, "Islam is peace," and "the face of terror is not the true faith of Islam."

While Islamophobia has been an issue for some time, particularly as the Islamic State has gained strength in Iraq and Syria, it intensified once Republican lawmakers and presidential candidates began calling for a halt to refugees from the Mideast in the wake of terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, Calif., late last year.

Both Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.) and former Florida governor Jeb Bush (R) have suggested screening asylum seekers on the basis of religion and accepting only Christians. And in December, Republican presidential front-runner Donald Trump called for a "total and complete shutdown"

of the entry of Muslims to the United States "until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on."

More broadly, Cruz and several other Republicans have criticized Obama and Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton for refusing to use the phrase "radical Islam" when discussing terrorist activities.

Obama has increasingly spoken out against the anti-Muslim rhetoric.

"When politicians insult Muslims, whether abroad or our fellow citizens, when a mosque is vandalized, or a kid bullied, that doesn't make us safer," he said during his State of the Union address this month.

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The Russian bombing of Syria must end, Mr. President

Russian war planes have been mainly bombing civilians and rebels supported by the US and its allies in Syria. All types of weapons have been used in this bombardment campaign, from cluster, vacuum and phosphorus bombs, to long-range cruise missiles and 'dumb bombs'. Hundreds of civilians and moderate rebels have been killed and injured, and tens of thousands have been forced to flee their homes.

Russia's military intervention in Syria is aimed mainly at preventing the defeat of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, who control and direct the Syrian regime troops and militias on the ground. Tens of thousands of Iran's foot soldiers — the Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi and Afghan Shia militias, as well as Syrians Alawi militiamen — have been committing war crimes and crimes against humanity under the cover of Russian planes.

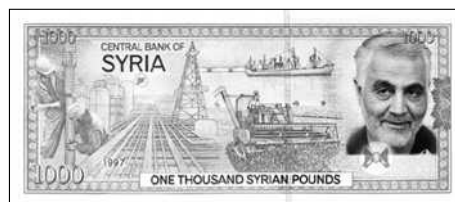
Syrians are asking: Under what right are Russia and Iran bombing Syria and starving besieged towns and cities to death? Under what right is the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and his supporters allowed to commit mass murder?

Syrians also want to know why the US and its allies are not stopping this carnage, and why the US and the EU are not imposing new sanctions against Russia and Iran for these war crimes. Most Syrians today believe that Western democratic values have been sacrificed in Syria for the sake of reaching a nuclear agreement with Iran and future business deals. The West's inaction to stop the war in Syria is seen as complacency, and even complicity.

Mr. President, Russia is capitalizing on the West's failure to act. The result is more radicalization and extremism, more terror, more refugees and a disintegrating Middle East. This cannot be in the interest of the US and its allies. That is why we ask you to:

- Treat the war in Syria as an international armed conflict that involves a foreign occupation by Iran and Russia on the one hand, and a liberation struggle by the Syrian people against this occupation on the other.

- Support referring the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court to investigate all war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria.
- Pressure at the Vienna talks Russia with more economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation so that it disengages from Iran and becomes part of the solution in Syria.
- Fulfill your promises by arming and training enough moderate Syrian rebels, not only to fight Daesh (so-called Islamic State) and al-Qaeda-linked groups, but also Syrian and Iranian regime forces and militias.
- Impose no-fly zones to protect civilians and allow humanitarian access throughout Syria, in line with the international 'responsibility to protect' norm.
- Help Syrians set up a democratic state where the rule of law prevails, and where there is no place for al-Assad and his supporters.



Mr. President, only the US can prevent further disintegration and chaos in Syria and the Middle East.

To visualize the Iranian occupation of Syria, the Naame Shaam campaign has produced a new Syrian bank note with the counterfeit of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, the de facto ruler of Syria. **Naame Shaam**, which means "Letter from Syria" in Persian, is a group of secular and progressive Iranian, Syrian and Lebanese activists and citizen-journalists who focus on uncovering the role of the Iranian regime in Syria. It is part of the Netherlands-based Rule of Law Foundation, www.lawrules.org. For more information about the campaign and its activities, see www.naameshaam.org.

This is the seventh Naame Shaam ad in the Washington Post. The other six were published in this paper in 2015.

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