

YET MORE REASON TO QUESTION RAFALLAH AL-SEHATI'S ROLE IN BENGHAZI ATTACK

You can't necessarily fault Eli Lake for the title the Daily Beast gave his latest entry in his efforts to help Romney surrogate Jason Chaffetz turn the Benghazi attack into Obama's Jimmy Carter: "Exclusive: Libya Cable Detailed Threats." Who knows whether he or his editor came up with it.

But you can fault those who keep pointing to the title as if the title reflects what the article itself says.

What Lake does is take a very routine diplomatic report—titled "Benghazi Weekly Report"—and spin it as proof of instability in Benghazi. It's not until the 6th paragraph when Lake reports that,

The cable, titled "Benghazi Weekly Report – September 11, 2012," notes the dangerous environment in eastern Libya. It does not, however, make a specific plea to Washington for more personnel or more security upgrades, and concludes that much of the violence in the country consists of Libyans attacking other Libyans, as opposed to specific plots directed at the West. Indeed, it says that in a meeting with Stevens, members of the Benghazi Local Council said security in their city was improving. [my emphasis]

Perhaps the title should have been, "Consulate reported that security in Benghazi was improving"?

What Lake uses to suggest that the Consulate should have had more security is a passage that pertains to two militia heads leveraging their

claimed power.

Here's what Lake says the cable said,

The cable, reviewed by The Daily Beast, recounts how the two militia leaders, Wissam bin Ahmed and Muhammad al-Gharabi, accused the United States of supporting Mahmoud Jibril, the head of the Libyan transitional government, to be the country's first elected prime minister. Jibril's centrist National Forces Alliance won the popular vote in Libyan elections in July, but he lost the prime minister vote in the country's Parliament on Sept. 12 by 94 to 92. Had he won, bin Ahmed and al-Gharabi warned they "would not continue to guarantee security in Benghazi, a critical function they asserted they were currently providing," the cable reads. [my emphasis]

Note that the cable itself—which was approved by Ambassador Chris Stevens—expresses some skepticism that bin Ahmed and al-Gharabi really were providing the critical security in Benghazi.

Lake, however, asserts not just that they did provide security, but that they were "responsible" for doing so, in his lead.

Just two days before the 9/11 anniversary attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, two leaders of the Libyan militias responsible for keeping order in the city threatened to withdraw their men.

As seems to be the case with Lake's exclusives, this detail is actually incredibly important, but not for the reasons he states. He doesn't identify the militias here, but al-Gharabi headed Rafallah al-Sehati until he was made to step down in the weeks after the attack. As the WaPo reported last week, Rafallah al-Sehati got

pulled into rapid response the night of the attack, and the Americans were hesitant to trust them.

But a second militia, Rafallah al-Sehati, that had not previously been involved in guarding the Americans, was also asked to provide assistance that night, a spokesman for the militia said. The group has been backed by the Libyan government and provides security in Benghazi, which has a minimally developed police force. But one of its leaders has described himself as a "jihadist," and Rafallah al-Sehati officials said that weapons capable of taking down airplanes were stolen when their compound was overrun by protesters last month.

Jamal Aboshala, a spokesman for Rafallah al-Sehati, said the request came at 3 a.m. local time from Fawzi Bukhatif, the commander of the 17th February militia. He said that American officials had initially declined an offer of help, and were later reluctant to share with militia members the precise location of an annex to which they had retreated.

And as I noted in response, Rafallah al-Sehati seemed to be trying to stall the American investigation of the attack by claiming Benghazi was too insecure for the FBI.

Now, the fact that the Consulate had to rely on Rafallah al-Sehati the night of the attack, just two days after they threatened to destabilize Benghazi for political retaliation, seems terribly important to the investigation. But it raises as many questions about what role Rafallah al-Sehati itself had in the attack, in addition to security preparations that had us relying on them when it mattered most.

Ah well. It's still a neat article. Readers of it will learn such interesting details as that

the Benghazi attack, with its 4 dead, was “the worst assault on a U.S. diplomatic mission since the 1979 hostage crisis in Iran,” making the attack worse, according to Lake, than the 1983 Lebanon attack that killed 63 or the 1998 attacks in Tanzania and Kenya that, between them, killed 223.

Or maybe Lake is just hewing so closely to the script he’s been given he doesn’t see how absurd his assertions are?