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Opening Statement

Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, Ranking Member

Hearing on “Benghazi, Instability and a New Government: Successes and Failures of U.S. Intervention in Libya” May 1, 2014

In 2011, the people of Libya rose up against their dictator, Muammar Qaddafi, to end his oppressive rule, which lasted more than four decades. At the time, Republicans and Democrats alike strongly supported helping armed rebels in their efforts to overthrow Qaddafi.

For example, in April 2011, Senator John McCain traveled to Libya and met with the rebels, after which he proclaimed: “They are my heroes.”

During a national television appearance on July 3, 2011, Senator McCain warned that allowing Qaddafi to remain in power would be far more dangerous to the United States than the alternative. He stated: “This notion that we should fear who comes after or what comes after Gadhafi ignores that if Gadhafi stays in power, it is then a direct threat to our national security.”

During a television appearance on April 24, 2011, Senator Lindsey Graham agreed that taking the fight directly to Qaddafi would protect our national security. He stated: “You cannot protect our vital national security interests if Gadhafi stays.” He also stated: “The focus should now be to cut the head of the snake off.”

As the revolution grew stronger, Qaddafi embarked on a brutal crackdown, and on March 17, 2011, he threatened his own people and warned that he would show them “no mercy.”

The next day, President Obama explained to the world why the United States was joining the effort to remove Qaddafi. He stated:

The world has watched events unfold in Libya with hope and alarm. Last month, protesters took to the streets across the country to demand their universal rights, and a government that is accountable to them and responsive to their aspirations. But they were met with an iron fist. ... Instead of respecting the rights of his own people, Qaddafi chose the path of brutal suppression. Innocent civilians were beaten, imprisoned, and in some cases killed.

Senator McCain applauded the President's decision. During a press conference in Libya, he stated: "Had President Obama and our allies not acted, history would have remembered Benghazi in the same breath as Srebrenica—a scene of mass atrocities and a source of international shame."

In an op-ed in April 2011, Senator McCain wrote that "the president was right to intervene. He now deserves our support as we and our coalition partners do all that is necessary to help the Libyan people secure a future of freedom."

In October 2011, Qaddafi finally met his ugly demise. During his oppressive rule, he was an extremely dangerous tyrant. During the 1980s, he supported international terrorism, including the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, which claimed the lives of 270 innocent civilians. He also reportedly pursued chemical, nuclear, and biological weapons.

In fact, after Qaddafi was killed, the new Libyan government reportedly uncovered two tons of chemical weapons that Qaddafi had kept hidden from the world, yet armed and ready to use.

As we all know, a dedicated and patriotic Special Envoy named Christopher Stevens arrived in Benghazi to work with the Libyan people on their transition to democracy. He had forged deep connections and affiliations with the Libyan people during his career, and he understood the challenges caused by 40 years of oppression. Ambassador Stevens believed in the promise of a new future for this country.

Today, Libya is at a crossroads. Open a newspaper and you will read about persistent violence in a country awash in weapons and a central government that has not yet consolidated its control over the country. On the other hand, the Libyan people continue to look to the West with respect and hope. They aspire to work with the United States to build a stable, pro-democratic country.

If we want the people of Libya to succeed, we must find a way to reengage the world and ourselves on behalf of a nation that desires our help.

This was the bipartisan goal shared by Republicans like Lindsey Graham and John McCain, who called on the United States "to build a partnership with a democratic and pro-American Libya that contributes to the expansion of security, prosperity and freedom across a pivotal region at a time of revolutionary change."

I hope today is a step towards this goal, and I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about how we can assist the people of Libya. Thank you all very much for being here.

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