

Prepared Statement

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At the request of Chairman Issa, and the Committee On Oversight & Government
Reform

Hearing on Security Failures in Benghazi, Tripoli on September 11, 2012

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Good morning Chairman Issa, Ranking Member Cummings, and other distinguished members of the committee. My name is Eric Nordstrom and I currently serve as a Supervisory Special Agent with the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Diplomatic Security. I joined the Department in April 1998 and have served in domestic and overseas postings including Washington, DC; Tegucigalpa, Honduras; Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; New Delhi, India, and most recently as the Regional Security Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli, Libya; a position I held from September 21, 2011 until July 26, 2012. Prior to joining the Department of State, I began my career in federal law enforcement with the Department of Treasury as a Customs Inspector. As the Regional Security Officer, or "RSO," at the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli, I served as the principal security advisor to U.S. Ambassadors Gene Cretz and Chris Stevens on security and law enforcement matters.

I am here today to provide testimony in support of your inquiry into the tragic events of September 11, 2012, including the murders of Ambassador Stevens, Sean Smith, Glen Doherty, and Tyrone Woods. I had the pleasure of working with Ambassador Stevens during the final months of my tour in Libya and would echo what

many are saying: the loss of Ambassador Stevens is not only tragic for his family and sad for our country, but his death will prove to be a devastating loss to Libya, struggling to recover from its recent civil war. My family and I would like to offer personal condolences to the families of these four patriots who gave their lives in the service of their country.

My contribution to our nation's efforts in Libya will prove to be only a small part of the wider effort. There were many of us dedicated to the mission in Libya, both at home and abroad. To my colleagues who served with me and to those who are presently there in the aftermath of this attack, you have your country's sincere thanks and prayers. Even after the horrific attack, I remain cautiously optimistic about the future of Libya because of the preponderance of pro-American and pro-Western sentiment among the Libyan people, despite the tremendous challenges that country faces.

Let me say a word about the evening of September 11th. The ferocity and intensity of the attack was nothing that we had seen in Libya, or that I had seen in my time in the Diplomatic Security Service. Having an extra foot of wall, or an extra-half dozen guards or agents would not have enabled us to respond to that kind of assault. I'm concerned that this attack will signal a new security-reality, just as the 1984 Beirut attack did for the Marines; the 1998 East Africa bombings did for the State Department, and 9/11 for the whole country. It is critical that we balance the risk-mitigation with the needs of our diplomats to do their job, in dangerous and uncertain places. The answer cannot be to operate from a bunker.

When I arrived in Tripoli on September 21, 2011, with Ambassador Cretz, in the midst of the Libyan Civil War, we were greeted by members of the Zintan militia, with machine guns and antiaircraft weapons welded to their pickup trucks, and covered in homemade camouflage paint. It was immediately obvious to me that post-revolution Libya was a weakened state, exhausted from their civil war, operating under fragmented and paralyzed government institutions, barely able to protect itself from the ravages of roving gangs, Qaddafi loyalists, and militia groups. As a result, in Tripoli, the Libyan temporary government was not able to extend security assets in the customary way to our mission. We were therefore extremely limited in our ability to call upon the host nation for security, intelligence, and law enforcement contacts to identify emerging threats or to ask for assistance in mitigating those threats in Tripoli.

But, what they could provide and did provide was comprehensive security for our short term VIP visits. The issue was not the willingness or quality of some of the Libyan security, but that they could not sustain that level of security for more than a couple of days. In short, Libyans wanted to help, but they had very limited capabilities to do so. The Libyan Ministry of the Interior, and the international donor community, including the Department's Anti-Terrorism Assistance Program identified this weakness, and during my time in Libya, several donors began providing training to address this shortcoming.

In Benghazi, the Government of Libya through the 17th February Brigade provided us consistent armed security since the very earliest days of the revolution. A

core unit of 17th February Brigade was housed at our compound. Based on our impression of the performance of this unit during the height of the revolution, our early meetings in Tripoli focused on getting the same or similar protection for our properties in Tripoli. Our confidence in 17th February Brigade was reaffirmed by their performance in response to a series of incidents at our facility in Benghazi.

The 17th February Brigade was not all that was tested in these incidents. While every security officer prefers to have more walls, more people, and more space between the facility and the potential threat, it was clear that the credibility and courage of the local guard force, the quality of our safe haven procedure where we sheltered in place, the effectiveness of our field expedient physical security improvements, and the communication with and response of the American Quick Reaction Force (QRF) worked to mitigate our existing threats. While I'd love to have had a large secured building and tons of security personnel in Benghazi, the fact is that the system we had in place was regularly tested and appeared to work as planned despite high turnover of DS agents on the ground.

This brings me to the issue of staff turnover. At traditional posts most staff are assigned for periods of one to three years. In re-establishing our presence in Libya after the revolution, we needed to rely on a high number of staff who could serve temporarily (what we call TDY), so that we could adjust staffing quickly in the event that the security situation drastically changed. In the short term, that can and did work very well. However, what I found is that having only TDY DS agents made re-establishing and

developing security procedures, policies and relationships more difficult. I understood it was also difficult for my colleagues in Washington to fill constant staffing requirements from a limited pool of available agents with high-threat tactical training. As the sole permanent RSO for the first seven months I was in Libya, I was unable to focus resources on developing traditional RSO programs as much as I would have wished, and instead spent a significant amount of time training new TDY staff, who were often set to leave eight weeks after they arrived. Nowhere was this more evident than in Benghazi, which had no permanent staff assigned to provide continuity, oversight and leadership to post's programs.

Given the limitations of using TDY personnel, and the requirement to be on the ground and engaged in Libya—both in Tripoli and in Benghazi—my immediate solution was to supplement security in Benghazi with personnel from Tripoli. We also hired locally employed drivers in Benghazi and provided them with counter-threat driver training in Tripoli so our Benghazi security personnel would not be required to act as drivers. In Tripoli, we trained and deployed a team of sixteen Libyan bodyguards thereby freeing up American security officers who could augment our security in Benghazi. Finally, once I had received two permanently assigned assistant RSOs, I was able to assign them responsibility for management of security programs which included providing continuity in Benghazi.

During my time in Tripoli, routine civil unrest, militia on militia violence, general lawlessness, and motor vehicle accidents were the primary threats facing our Mission. In

the Spring of 2012 we saw and noted an increasing number of attacks and incidents targeting foreign affiliated organizations. Grenade attacks on UN and UK vehicles, protestors storming TNC buildings in Benghazi and Tripoli to protest election issues, a crude IED attack on our compound in Benghazi in June, an RPG attack against the UK Ambassador's motorcade in Benghazi, and attacks against the ICRC in Misrata and Benghazi, and protests outside of the Russian, Chinese, Syrian and Nigerien Embassies in Tripoli, where protestors were able to gain access to the embassy grounds, where all cause for concern, and resulted in a regular review of our security procedures by post's Emergency Action Committee. As a result of these incidents, we deployed a mobile patrol designed to observe the routes and areas adjacent to our compounds, conducted emergency preparedness drills, reviewed and revised post's tripwires, updated and practiced internal defense procedures, and reiterated our requests at all levels of government for a consistent armed host nation security force. As a result of Ambassador Steven's meeting with senior Libyan Government officials, including the Minister of Interior, a 3-person armed police unit and marked vehicle was placed at our Tripoli residential compound during daytime hours.

In Benghazi, we deferred the arrival of the principal officer, curtailed staff movements in town, and engaged local officials on the progress of their investigations into the June attacks on our compound and the UK motorcade. In both Tripoli and Benghazi, we reviewed lock-down procedures with members of our local guard force, and in Benghazi, continued to train with the 17th February Brigade members stationed on our compound. I was also in regular contact with other diplomatic missions regarding

security, particularly the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany and the United Nations, to ensure that our security profile and posture was in sync with what other missions were doing. Finally, in early July, post requested continued TDY staffing of 15 U.S. security professionals, either DS field office or MSD agents or DOD/SST personnel, plus retention of a 6 agent MSD training team, for an additional 60 days, until mid-September 2012.

Much has been made about physical resource requests, and I'd like to address that issue. From the start, I was impressed with the plans that would send our team into Libya—a massive show of well-organized resources. I felt that resource requests would be considered seriously and fastidiously by DS and the Department. I believe that the vast majority of my requests were considered in that manner:

- \$170,00 worth of closed circuit televisions and a public address system was approved in a matter of days;
- More than half a million dollars of field expedient security upgrades including upgrades to the perimeter wall, vehicles gates and devices to control access to our compound in Tripoli, such as delta barriers and drop arms was supplied;
- More than \$100,000 of physical security upgrades were completed in Benghazi, including upgrades to the perimeter wall, vehicle gates, drop arms, vehicle barriers and guard booths was conducted;
- Upgraded perimeter light for our compounds in Tripoli and Benghazi was approved and deployed;

- Uniforms and equipment for our 125 member guard force and newly created local body guard team were supplied;
- 200 personal protective vests and helmets for our guards and U.S. staff in Tripoli and Benghazi was delivered; and,
- 25 armored vehicles were shipped to us during the course of the 10 months that I was at post.

Other upgrades requested such as grillwork for windows on our residential compound in Tripoli, upgraded entry doors for compound buildings, and residential protective window film to prevent injuries from flying glass would be included under a subsequent project to construct an interim Embassy compound. That project was scheduled to begin in August/September 2012.

Given the fluid nature of the political and security environment in Libya my preference was to maintain a stable number of security personnel. When I arrived in September, we had 37 State Department and Defense Department Personnel in Tripoli. In Benghazi, we had eight DS agents. As these security professionals were focused on crisis and stabilization work, I understood that because of the nature of their work, their time in Libya would have be limited, assuming we saw a general improvement in the security environment. After about four months, all of us at post agreed that the security situation in Libya had improved, at least temporarily, and we adjusted our security posture appropriately as did many other diplomatic missions operation in Libya. For example, many positive security tripwires we had set, were met: commercial air flights into Benghazi and Tripoli resumed; the country's banking and commercial sectors

stabilized; the amount and number of militia checkpoints reduced; senior Qaddafi regime officials were captured or killed; the civil war officially ended; significant oil production resumed; a cabinet had been formed; and children returned to school.

But, despite all of these improvements, for nearly 42 years, the Libyans had no experience in political consensus building or dispute resolution, and with the country awash in weapons, conflicts quickly escalated to gunfights. Additionally, it took the Libyan Government a very long time to integrate militias and former fighters into the new security structure, a process which they continue to struggle with to this day. There was no single, uniformed police force under Government control, and police needed support of the disparate militias in order to carry out their work. Therefore, it was difficult to get an effective police or security response to embassy requests.

Our long term security plan in Libya was to recruit and deploy an armed, locally hired Libyan bodyguard unit. However, because of Libyan political sensitivities, armed private security companies were not allowed to operate in Libya. Therefore, our existing, uniformed static local guard force, both in Tripoli and Benghazi were unarmed, similar to our static local guard forces at many posts around the world. Their job was to observe, report, and alert armed host nation security, and armed DS agents on-site. This left us with two primary options: continue the use of U.S. security personnel, or, create and deploy an armed, bodyguard unit consisting of local Libyan employees. The use of local nationals as armed security or armed bodyguards is a routine practice in the Department, often to comply with local firearms regulations in the host nation. Local nationals

provide us with continuity, local expertise, threat awareness, and language and cultural expertise. In my mind, the primary issue was maintaining U.S. security personnel in Libya (the SST and DS agents) for a sufficient amount of time to enable the full training and deployment, including mentorship, of the local bodyguard unit. Given the fragile security environment and the increasing size of the mission, post revised our initial bodyguard numbers upward from an initial number of 24 shortly after I departed post. It is my understanding that DS fully supported and funded this expansion.

The idea of private armed security in Libya was still a new and sensitive concept to the Libyan Government. Abuses of Qaddafi foreign mercenaries were still fresh in the minds of the Libya people. While the Government of Libya and specifically the Ministry of Interior were supportive of the idea of a direct-hire Libyan bodyguard unit for the mission, it would take them time to develop the necessary infrastructure to support our proposal, including a site for driver training and fire arms training for the bodyguards. The speed of that deployment was also contingent upon the issuance of firearms permits from the Government of Libya. Although more than a dozen bodyguards completed training by late April, we could only utilize them for duties that did not require them to be armed. This included acting as a liaison, or advance agent for a VIP visit or the Ambassador's travel. U.S. security personnel were issued firearms permits at the beginning of June, 2012, with our local bodyguards receiving permits about a month later. The delay was a result of the Ministry of Interior conducting additional vetting of the bodyguards, to ensure that they were not former Qaddafi loyalists.

As I departed Libya at the end of July, I understood that DS was in the process of identifying continued DS agent TDY support to maintain the staffing levels requested by post in early July. Specifically, post requested a minimum of 13 TDY security personnel for Tripoli to provide movement and static security support plus 2 TDY agents to act as Assistant RSOs until the RSO could grow to 5 full-time positions. Post requested DS continue to fill the December 2011 staffing level, and maintain at least a minimum of 3 TDY agents for Benghazi. It was my understanding and the understanding of my successor that TDY staffing levels in Tripoli would be reduced as our bodyguard unit expanded. When I departed on July 26, 2012, the mission had the following DS staffing: 3 permanent RSOs, 4 TDY High Trained field office DS agents, 4 MSD DS Agents focused on bodyguard training, 16 local Libyan bodyguards, and 3 TDY DS agents in Benghazi. The 16 member SST was scheduled for a phased departure by mid-August. Finally, there was on-going planning to retain 6 of the 16 SST members in Libya to engage in more traditional bilateral Department of Defense training activities with the Libyan Ministry of Defense.

I'm confident that the committee will conclude that Department of State, Diplomatic Security Service, and Mission Libya officers conducted themselves professionally and with careful attention to managing people and budgets in a way that reflects the gravity of their task. I'm proud of the work that our team accomplished in Libya under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. The protection of our nation's diplomats, our embassies and consulates, and the work produced there is deserving of the time and treasure invested. The work of our fellow Americans abroad is essential to

advance the goals of our nation. I am glad to further discuss my experience, and hope that it proves beneficial for this committee, the State Department, and my fellow DS agents protecting and advancing U.S. interests abroad.

May God bless our nation and our efforts to bring peace to a contentious world.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Committee, for the opportunity to appear before you today. I stand ready to answer any questions you might have.