

GOP's Benghazi committee prepares for media spotlight



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The rising threat from Islamic extremists has set the stage for Republicans to make a splash with the launch of their Benghazi investigation next week.

The media glare had largely fallen away from the probe into the terror attack on U.S. facilities in Benghazi, Libya, that left Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans dead.

But with the second anniversary of the attack looming on Thursday, and a new book by U.S. security contractors claiming a CIA station chief ordered them to “stand down” during the assault, the start of the investigation into Benghazi is poised to become a major event.

“ISIS has now woken up the American people to the fact that the threat is real, and Benghazi is certainly symptomatic of that,” said Homeland Security Committee Chairman Michael McCaul (R-Texas), who is not a member of the Benghazi panel, in an interview.

In particular, lawmakers said the lessons learned from Benghazi would have to be part of the conversation as President Obama and Congress confront the challenge of protecting U.S. citizens and facilities that have been targeted by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The House Foreign Affairs Committee is holding a hearing Wednesday morning on the continued violence in Libya, giving Republicans another forum to raise questions about Benghazi.

Even Democrats, who have dismissed the GOP-led investigation as a political stunt, acknowledged that interest in next week’s Benghazi hearing is likely to be high.

“I think the public will be more focused — how much more, I don’t know — on Benghazi because of ISIS, and the media, too,” said Rep. Elijah Cummings (D-Md.), the top Democrat on both the Oversight Committee and the special Benghazi panel.

“When Americans hear about or see these beheadings and the idea that these guys are so ruthless, I think that forces people to think more about foreign policy,” Cummings said. “And I don’t think the average American pays too much attention to foreign policy.”

House Republicans formed the bipartisan 12-member panel over the summer in an attempt to unearth any new evidence about the policies and decisions that preceded the attack.

Rep. Trey Gowdy (R-S.C.) will lead the panel. He is a former prosecutor who has been conducting the initial stages of the investigation out of the public eye.

Gowdy, who declined through a spokeswoman to be interviewed, hasn’t said which witnesses will be called when the panel gathers publicly for the first time next week, but it’s unlikely that he’ll get much cooperation from the Obama administration.

Secretary of State John Kerry isn’t expected to appear, and Republicans haven’t said whether they will seek testimony from Hillary Clinton, who was in charge at Foggy Bottom the night of the deadly assault.

The committee could also seek testimony from the five private contractors who are out with a book, *13 Hours*, pinning blame on the CIA for delaying a rescue mission they say could have saved the lives of the four Americans who were killed.

The contractors have been doing the media circuit, claiming that a CIA station chief ordered them to “stand down” as a diplomatic compound on the other side of Benghazi came under attack.

“I strongly believe if we’d left immediately, they’d still be alive today,” one of the contractors said in a recent interview with Fox News.

Their account is providing political fodder for Republicans, who have suggested that Clinton or some other top administration official ordered higher-ups in Benghazi to hold off on a rescue mission.

“The president of the United States said they did everything they could possibly do to save the people in Benghazi. I still highly doubt that statement,” said Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah), a vocal critic of the administration’s handling of the attacks. “You cannot name a single military asset that was ordered to go into Benghazi during those hours.”

“Somebody in that food chain said ‘stand down,’ ” he said. Chaffetz is not on the Benghazi panel. “It’s one of the myriad questions that continues to perpetuate the problem. If we can’t figure out that, then how will we make sure it never happens again?”

Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee have rejected the contractors’ account.

Rep. Dutch Ruppersberger (D-Md.) said lawmakers in the House and Senate who have investigated the attacks never came across evidence indicating the station chief had told his team to “stand down” and abort a rescue mission.

“After interviewing these individuals, including those writing the book, and all of the others on the ground that night, both Republicans and Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee and the Senate Intelligence Committee concluded that there was not, in fact, an order to stand down and no evidence was found to support such a claim,” Ruppersberger said in a statement this week.

He said the U.S. officials in charge of the CIA annex deliberated “thoughtfully, reasonably and quickly” about whether the rescue team should wait for further security before acting.

The House Benghazi panel has mostly been working behind the scenes this summer. It’s staffed up and conducted interviews with witnesses. Rep. Tammy Duckworth (D-Ill.), a panel member who lost both legs in the Iraq War, said she viewed video footage of the attack for the first time during secured briefings.

But next week, the issue goes before the C-SPAN and cable news cameras.

“The beheadings really got their attention, and all of a sudden it’s clear that [Obama’s] narrative that things were winding down was not accurate,” McCaul said.

— *This story was updated at 11:35 a.m. to reflect that John Kerry is not expected to appear before the Benghazi committee.*