

# The American Conservative

## The Libya Sideshow and Its Consequences

Posted By [Daniel Larison](#) On April 4, 2011 @ 10:08 am In

That afternoon in the Situation Room vividly demonstrates a rarely stated fact about the administration's responses to the uprisings sweeping the region: The Obama team holds no illusions about Colonel Qaddafi's long-term importance. Libya is a sideshow. Containing Iran's power remains their central goal in the Middle East. Every decision — from Libya to Yemen to Bahrain to Syria — is being examined under the prism of how it will affect what was, until mid-January, the dominating calculus in the Obama administration's regional strategy: how to slow Iran's nuclear progress, and speed the arrival of opportunities for a successful uprising there. ~[The New York Times](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

If this is correct, the administration has been applying David Frum's [standard](#) <sup>[2]</sup> for judging regional policy decisions:

Every regional decision has to be measured against the test: Is this moving us closer to — or further from — a positive change in the Iranian political system?

As it happens, I think this is a misguided goal to be pursuing. The administration's standard measures the success or failure of U.S. policy in the region based on whether it not it facilitates changes in Iranian policy and the Iranian political system, when the prospects of either one are currently remote (partly because of the attack on Libya). It has already set itself up to be judged a failure, because it seems likely that ongoing regional instability will increase Iranian influence.

By their own account, the administration sees Libya as a sideshow, which raises the question of why the U.S. should be diverting any resources and distracting its attention with an ongoing war for the sake of a "sideshow." If the administration has been examining its decisions on the basis of whether or not they help to slow Iran's nuclear progress, it's fairly significant that the decision to attack Libya seems to be a disastrous setback to their Iran policy. As Doug Bandow [argued](#) <sup>[3]</sup> most recently, attacking the one authoritarian state that gave up its nuclear weapon ambitions in the recent past marks the end of serious non-proliferation efforts around the world, including in Iran:

Nonproliferation long has been an American and European priority. Best achieved peacefully, the U.S. government nevertheless views the objective as important enough to warrant war. Even today Washington refuses to forswear military action against Iran and North Korea. Until now, Libya was used to showcase the policy of peaceful nonproliferation. But the West's attack on that nation has turned the Libyan example inside out. The allies have effectively destroyed the chance of persuading any state at odds with the West from acquiring a nuclear bomb. No government which imagines itself in Washington's gunsight is likely to ever again voluntarily give up the one weapon capable of deterring America.

Once we move beyond the immediate, weak justification for the Libyan war, we see a degree of strategic ineptitude in the decision to attack Libya that is truly remarkable. New nuclear weapons states and proliferating states such as North Korea are more satisfied than ever with their decision to seek weapons, and they have a new example of why holding on to nuclear weapons is very much in their interest. Disarming North Korea was not all that likely at the best of times, but now it is unthinkable. Iran has an additional incentive to press ahead with its nuclear program, and it now has even less reason to accept any bargain that the U.S. might offer. We have just confirmed in the minds of every paranoid, authoritarian, and anti-American regime that Gaddafi's mistake was that he was insufficiently paranoid and too trusting of the West. As long as "counter-proliferation" remains a priority, the U.S. has starting edging closer to armed confrontation with these states. The Libyan war needs to be judged on its immediate consequences, but to the extent that it is making conflict with Iran more

rather than less likely the long-term damage to U.S. interests from attacking Libya has to be assessed accordingly.

The administration would like to say that making an example of Gaddafi by showing off U.S. military might could also make the Iranian government want to make a deal, but what they have actually done is to make any “carrots” seem designed to trick Iran into giving up its weapons to make it easier to attack. Not only has the treatment of Gaddafi shown the folly of negotiating away nuclear weapons, because it will not guarantee security and non-interference in the future, but Iran will conclude correctly that the Libyan war would not be happening if Gaddafi had not made his deal. Iran is vulnerable to attack from the U.S. or other governments only so long as it does not develop a deterrent, and we have shown the only authoritarian ruler to abandon pursuit of such weapons to be a sucker.

Other recent decisions may or may not advance the cause of pressuring Iran, but judged by this standard many of them seem to be very odd decisions. U.S. acquiescence in the GCC intervention in Bahrain, pulling the plug on Saleh in Yemen, and seeming to react rather mildly to Syria’s crackdowns might make sense in each individual case, but taken together they seem to be working to the overall advantage of Iran. The heavy-handed GCC intervention is explicitly anti-Iranian and anti-Shi’ite in focus, but that may end up benefiting Iran in the long run by providing more of an opening for its influence among Gulf state Shi’ites where it was previously not as great. Giving up on Saleh could end up keeping Yemen from spiraling more out of control, or it could backfire badly by leading to the splintering of the country or inviting Saudi intervention. Despite the mild response to Assad’s crackdowns, the policy of engaging Syria would appear to be dead for the time being. As long as Assad and his regime remain in power in the wake of these crackdowns, that would seem to rule out any attempt at pulling Syria out of Iran’s orbit for the foreseeable future.

If the U.S. has been silent about the GCC intervention in Bahrain because relations with the Saudis have deteriorated badly on account of the treatment of Mubarak, that would seem to damn Washington’s handling of Mubarak as well. Washington has had to muzzle itself when it has more reason to speak out, because it spoke out during the Egyptian protests when its public position was not as important to the outcome. It seems clear enough that the fall of Mubarak was a boon for Iran and its allies, and to the extent that the U.S. is now forced to go along with Saudi and Gulf state overkill in Bahrain to make up for giving up on Mubarak that makes the decision to push for his removal that much more questionable when judged by the administration’s Iran standard. If Saudi and Gulf state overkill works to Iran’s benefit, we are seeing a chain reaction set in motion by the decision to push for Mubarak’s removal that is unwittingly aiding the growth of Iranian influence, and the attack on Libya will give Iran another important reason to pursue nuclear weapons.

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- [1] The New York Times: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/03/weekinreview/03sanger.html>
- [2] standard: <http://www.frumforum.com/what-does-bahrains-turmoil-mean-for-iran>
- [3] argued: <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-end-nonproliferation-5093>

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