

# PROVIDENCE Journal

## Hold politicians accountable for Libya debacle

By Doug Bandow

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Will America ever again be at peace? Pressure is building for the United States again to intervene in Libya.

Less than three years after Libya's civil war the country has ceased to exist. This debacle offers a clear lesson for American policymakers. But denizens of Washington seem never to learn.

Like many presidents in other conflicts, Barack Obama lied the American people into war. The administration presented the issue as one of humanitarian intervention, to save the people of Benghazi from slaughter at the hands of Libyan dictator Moammar Khadafy.

Although he was a nasty character, he had slaughtered no one when his forces reclaimed other territory. In Benghazi, he only threatened those who had taken up arms against him.

In fact, the allies never believed their rhetoric. They immediately shifted their objective from civilian protection to slow-motion regime change. Thousands died in the low-tech civil war.

Still, the chief advocates of what has come to be called Hillary's war claimed success. Alas, Libya was an artificial nation. When Khadafy died political structure vanished. The country split apart.

Libya quickly went from disappointment to catastrophe. Today multiple warring factions have divided into two broad coalitions.

"Operation Dignity" is a largely secular grouping, including Gen. Khalifa Haftar's "Libyan National Army" and the internationally recognized government. Haftar is a man of flexible loyalties who last May launched a campaign against the Islamist militias with covert support from Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

"Libya Dawn" is a mix of Islamists, moderate to radical, and conservative merchants that now controls Tripoli. It is backed by Qatar, Sudan and Turkey, and denies that the Islamic State poses much of a threat.

The civil war has been intensifying, with combatants using heavy weapons and even air power. Last year fighting forced the closure of the U.S. embassy.

Now Libya has become an ISIS outpost. Three jihadist groups have formally claimed allegiance to the Islamic State. These forces have attacked oil installations, killed journalists, and conducted bombings. Some of these militants were responsible for the murder of U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens more than two years ago.

ISIS's slaughter of Egyptian Coptic workers triggered retaliatory airstrikes by Cairo, and then new Islamic State attacks. The national wreckage known as Libya is being pulled into the regional sectarian maelstrom.

Obviously, Khadafy's continued rule would have been no picnic. Nevertheless, he offered an ugly stability which looks better than chaos, civil war and terrorism. European officials now worry about larger refugee flows, drug and weapons smuggling, and new terrorist attacks.

Alas, this disastrous history hasn't precluded new proposals for Western involvement. Abdullah al-Thinni, Libya's official prime minister, wants the West back.

Egypt and France urged the U.N. Security Council to meet on the issue. Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi advocated that the UN run a "stronger mission."

Unfortunately, there's no reason to believe that the second (or third) time would be the charm.

The West naturally favors the internationally recognized government. But these forces are divided and Haftar, the dominant figure, is a dubious ally. Intervening against the Islamist-oriented government would make enemies of many Libyans not linked to the Islamic State.

The best outcome would be a national unity government as backed by the U.S. and European governments. But months of mediation have led nowhere.

More practical would be to acquiesce in the partition of what never was an organic nation. In the meantime the West should consider selectively lifting the arms embargo to aid groups likely to combat jihadist forces.

Moreover, Libya's neighbors should act rather than wait helplessly for Washington to do something. The region's stability is these nations' business. They should put their arsenals, filled with expensive American-made weapons, to practical use.

Libya's collapse has been almost total. But so far no one has been held to account.

As problems metastasize with the rise of ISIS in Libya, however, the American people may be more inclined to critically assess the judgment and competence of Washington policymakers. Voters should hold officials accountable for the disaster they created in Libya.

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