

The Obama Administration Wrecked Libya For A Generation

Doug Bandow

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Libya's ongoing destruction belongs to Hillary Clinton more than anyone else. It was she who pushed President Barack Obama to launch his splendid little war, backing the overthrow of Moammar Gaddafi in the name of protecting Libya's civilians. When later asked about Gaddafi's death, she cackled and exclaimed: "We came, we saw, he died."

Alas, his was not the last death in that conflict, which has flared anew, turning Libya into a real-life *Game of Thrones*. An artificial country already suffering from deep regional divisions, Libya has been further torn apart by political and religious differences. One commander fighting on behalf of the Government of National Accord (GNA), Salem Bin Ismail, told the BBC: "We have had chaos since 2011."

Arrayed against the weak unity government is the former Gaddafi general, U.S. citizen, and one-time CIA adjunct Khalifa Haftar. For years, the two sides have appeared to be in relative military balance, but a who's who of meddling outsiders has turned the conflict into an international affair. The latest playbook features Egypt, France, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Russia supporting Haftar, while Italy, Qatar, and Turkey are with the unity government.

In April, Haftar launched an offensive to seize Tripoli. It faltered until Russian mercenaries made an appearance in September, bringing Haftar to the gates of Tripoli. He apparently is also employing Sudanese mercenaries, though not with their nation's backing. Now Turkey plans to introduce troops to bolster the official government.

Washington's position is at best confused. It officially recognizes the GNA. When Haftar started his offensive, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a statement urging "the immediate halt to these military operations." However, President Donald Trump then initiated a friendly phone call to Haftar "to discuss ongoing counterterrorism efforts and the need to achieve peace and stability in Libya," according to the White House. More incongruously, "The president recognized Field Marshal Haftar's significant role in fighting terrorism and securing Libya's oil resources, and the two discussed a shared vision for Libya's transition to a stable, democratic political system." The State Department recently urged both sides to step back. However, Haftar continues to advance, and just days ago captured the coastal city of Sirte.

In recent years, Libya had been of little concern to the U.S. It was an oil producer, but Gaddafi had as much incentive to sell the oil as did King Idris I, whom Gaddafi and other members of the “Free Officers Movement” ousted. Gaddafi carefully balanced interests in Libya’s complex tribal society and kept the military weak over fears of another coup. He was a geopolitical troublemaker, supporting a variety of insurgent and terrorist groups. But he steadily lost influence, alienating virtually every African and Middle Eastern government.

Of greatest concern to Washington, Libyan agents organized terrorist attacks against the U.S.—bombing an American airliner and a Berlin disco frequented by American soldiers—leading to economic sanctions and military retaliation. However, those days were long over by 2011. Eight years before, in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Gaddafi repudiated terrorism and ended his missile and nuclear programs in a deal with the U.S. and Europe. He was feted in European capitals. His government served as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council from 2008 to 2009. American officials congratulated him for his assistance against terrorism and discussed possible assistance in return. All seemed forgiven.

Then in 2011, the Arab Spring engulfed Libya, as people rose against Gaddafi’s rule. He responded with force to reestablish control. However, Western advocates of regime change warned that genocide was possible and pushed for intervention under United Nations auspices. In explaining his decision to intervene, Obama stated: “We knew that if we waited one more day, Benghazi... could suffer a massacre that would have reverberated across the region and stained the conscience of the world.” Russia and China went along with a resolution authorizing “all necessary measures to prevent the killing of civilians.”

In fact, the fears were fraudulent. Gaddafi was no angel, but he hadn’t targeted civilians, and his florid rhetoric, cited by critics, only attacked those who had taken up arms. He even promised amnesty to those who abandoned their weapons. With no civilians to protect, NATO, led by the U.S., bombed Libyan government forces and installations and backed the insurgents’ offensive. It was not a humanitarian intervention, but a lengthy, costly, low-tech, regime-change war, mostly at Libyan expense. Obama claimed: “We had a unique ability to stop the violence.” Instead his administration ensured that the initial civil war would drag on for months—and the larger struggle ultimately for years.

On October 20, 2011, Gaddafi was discovered hiding in a culvert in Sirte. He was beaten, sodomized with a bayonet, shot, and killed. That essentially ended the first phase of the extended Libyan civil war. Gaddafi had done much to earn his fate, but his death led to an entirely new set of problems.

A low level insurgency continued, led by former Gaddafi followers. Proposals either to disband militia forces or integrate them into the National Transitional Council (NTC) military went unfulfilled, and this developed into the conflict’s second phase. Elections delivered fragmented results, as ideological, religious, and other divisions ran deep. Militias were accused of misusing government funds, employing violence, and kidnapping and assassinating their opponents. Islamist groups increasingly attempted to impose religious rule. Violence and insecurity worsened.

In February 2014, Haftar challenged the General National Congress (GNC). Hostilities broadly evolved between the GNC/GNA, backed by several militias, which controlled Tripoli and much of the country’s west, and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives, which was supported by

Haftar and his Libyan National Army. Multiple domestic factions, forces, and militias also were involved. Among them was the Islamic State, which murdered Egyptian Coptic (Christian) laborers.

The African Union and the United Nations promoted various peace initiatives. However, other governments fueled hostilities. Most notable now is the potential entry of Turkish troops.

In mid-December, Turkey's parliament approved an agreement to provide equipment, military training, technical aid, and intelligence. (The Erdogan government also controversially set maritime boundaries with Libya that conflict with other claims, most notably from Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Israel.) Ankara introduced some members of the dwindling Syrian insurgents once aligned against the Assad regime to Libya and raised the possibility of adding its "quick reaction force" to the fight.

At the end of last month, the Erdogan government introduced, and parliament approved, legislation to authorize the deployment of combat forces. President Erdogan criticized nations that backed a "putschist general" and "warlord" and promised to support the GNA "much more effectively." While noting that Turkey doesn't "go where we are not invited" (except, apparently, Syria), Erdogan added that "since now there is an invitation [from the GNA], we will accept it."

But Haftar refused to back down. Last week, he called on "men and women, soldiers and civilians, to defend our land and our honor." He continued: "We accept the challenge and declare jihad and a call to arms."

Turkish legislator Ismet Yilmaz supported the intervention and warned that the conflict might "spread instability to Turkey." More likely the intervention is a grab for energy, since Ankara has devoted significant resources of late to exploring the Eastern Mediterranean for oil and gas. Libya has oil deposits, of course, which could be exploited under a friendly government. Perhaps most important, Ankara wants to ensure that its interests are respected in the Eastern Mediterranean.

However, direct intervention is an extraordinarily dangerous step. It puts Turkey in the line of fire, as in Syria. Ankara's forces could clash with those of Russia, which maintains the merest veneer of deniability over its role in Libya. And other powers—Egypt, perhaps, or the UAE—might ramp up their involvement in an effort to thwart Erdogan's plans.

In response, the U.S. attempted to warn Turkey against intervening. "External military intervention threatens prospects for resolving the conflict," said State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus with no hint of irony. Congress might go further: some of its members have already proposed sanctioning Russia for the introduction of mercenaries, and Ankara has few friends left on Capitol Hill. Nevertheless it is rather late for Washington to cry foul. Its claim to essentially a monopoly on Mideast meddling can only be seen as risible by other powers.

The Arab League has also criticized "foreign interference." In a resolution passed in late December, the group expressed "serious concern over the military escalation further aggravating the situation in Libya and which threatens the security and stability of neighboring countries and the entire region." However, Arab League is no less hypocritical. Egypt, the UAE, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, all deeply involved in the conflict, are members of the league. And no one would be surprised if some or all of them decided to expand their participation in the fighting. Egyptian

president Abdel Fatah al-Sisi insisted: “We will not allow anyone to control Libya. It is a matter of Egyptian national security.”

Although the fighting is less intense than in, say, Syria, combat has gone high-tech. According to the *Washington Post*: “Eight months into Libya’s worst spasm of violence in eight years, the conflict is being fought increasingly by weaponized drones.” ISIS is one of the few beneficiaries of these years of fighting. GNA-allied militias that once cooperated with the U.S. and other states in counterterrorism are now focused on Haftar, allowing militants to revive, set up desert camps, and organize attacks. Washington still employs drones, but they rely on accurate intelligence, best gathered on the ground, and even then well-directed hits are no substitute for local ground operations.

The losers are the Libyan people. The fighting has resulted in thousands of deaths and tens of thousands of refugees. Divisions, even among tribes, are growing. The future looks ever dimmer. Fathi Bashagha, the GNA interior minister, lamented: “Every day we are burying young people who should be helping us build Libya.” Absent a major change, many more will be buried in the future.

Yet the air of unreality surrounding the conflict remains. In late December, President Trump met with al-Sisi and, according to the White House, the two “rejected foreign exploitation and agreed that parties must take urgent steps to resolve the conflict before Libyans lose control to foreign actors.” However, the latter already happened—nine years ago when America first intervened.

The Obama administration did not plan to ruin Libya for a generation. But its decision to take on another people’s fight has resulted in catastrophe. Hillary Clinton’s malignant gift keeps on giving. Such is the cost of America’s promiscuous war-making.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. He is a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan and the author of several books, including Foreign Follies: America’s New Global Empire.