



Ten Years After Regime Change: Libyans Are Dying Because of American Arrogance

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It has been nearly a decade since Libyan dictator Moammar Khadafy suffered an ugly demise at the hands of insurgents. Few mourned his passing. When asked about his fate, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton cackled maniacally: "We came, we saw, he died."

American and European officials declared success. Another dictator down, freedom on the march, U.S. and Europe triumphant, Arabs embracing democracy, memories of Iraq excised. "Leading from behind" with bombers and drones looked to be a winning strategy.

That was then.

Alas, once again Washington found that it was easier to blow up a nation than create a stable liberal peace. The victors fell out and squabbled among themselves, divided by ideology, ambition, theology, and geography. They ended up playing what amounted to a real Game of Thrones, minus the dragons. Columnist Danny Sjursen aptly observed: "the traditional descriptor of 'civil war' – which usually implies two discrete sides – only vaguely applies. Given the broad array of ethnic, religious, and criminal militias involved – and cultivated by various and nefarious foreign actors – it seems anarchy might be the more appropriate Libyan label."

The bloody aftermath of American intervention opened space for lawless militias. In 2014 Amnesty International complained that the West was ignoring its violent handiwork: "Armed groups have tortured – and probably summarily killed – detainees in their custody, and have committed a wave of abductions targeting civilians based on their origins or perceived political allegiance."

Worse, certainly from the West's standpoint, was the spread of radical jihadists, including the Islamic State. In 2015 the latter group highlighted its vile agenda by murdering 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians who had been working construction in Sirte, Libya. Two months later the Islamic State killed 30 Christians from Eritrea and Ethiopia, in this case migrants seeking passage to Europe. They all died as a consequence of Washington's and Europe's hubris.

Eventually two competing governments emerged and today are involved in a revived full-scale civil war. The official Government of National Accord, based in Tripoli and headed by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, was formed through a United Nations initiative. Opposing the GNA is Khalifa Haftar, commander of the Libyan National Army, whose stronghold is in the east. He

helped Khadafy come to power, was captured fighting in Chad, spent two decades in America, became a citizen and CIA asset, returned to Libya, and ended up as a not particularly competent field marshal.

The anfractuious details of the conflict are difficult to follow and don't much matter to Americans. The battle has raged back and forth, neither side strong enough to conquer the whole of the country. And the fighting has attracted outside interest, with multiple countries intervening, helping drive the war's course.

Today Italy, Qatar, and most importantly Turkey support the GNA. Ankara's assistance recently helped turn the tide, as Haftar's forces were put to flight. Egypt, France, Jordan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates back Haftar. Moscow's aid brought the field marshal to Tripoli's gates by last year's end. The fight is no longer just among Libyans. The Erdogan government deployed former Syrian insurgents under Turkish command; Russia sent in mercenaries controlled by the Putin government as well as Syrians paid by the same.

Although the GNA lately has gotten the better of Haftar, battlefield success seems to change as regularly as phases of the Moon. Observed Jason Pack of the group Libya Analysis: "Haftar's ability to rule eastern Libya and the power he has over many tribes in the center of the country will not be changed. Rather the next phase of the civil war would start." The Libyan people will suffer whichever way the combat goes.

The U.S. has no official position on the war. The Obama administration, responsible for creating a geopolitical mess in Libya, recognized the GNA. However, President Donald Trump called Haftar and, according to the White House, "recognized Field Marshal Haftar's significant role in fighting terrorism and securing Libya's oil routes, and the two discussed a shared vision for Libya's transition to a stable, democratic political system." After which the State Department urged Haftar to halt his offensive. The only good news: when urged to maintain America's involvement in the conflict by the Italian government, Trump replied: "I think the United States has right now enough roles. We're in a role everywhere." All too true.

Several lessons stand out from Washington foolish decision to enter Libya's civil war, in response to Europe's self-serving supplications and Clinton's bloody ambitions.

Most important, Washington should avoid conflicts which don't matter to Americans' security. Khadafy originally was a geopolitical troublemaker, but that soon left him isolated. Terrorist attacks on the US triggered airstrikes by the Reagan administration. However, in 2003 the discovery of nuclear materials bound for Libya led him to make a deal with the West, making him the toast of Europe. Having been housebroken, so to speak, he worked with American officials against terrorism.

In fact, in 2009 the Senate's trio of apocalyptic wannabe field marshals Joseph Lieberman, John McCain, and Lindsey Graham visited Khadafy in Tripoli to discuss possible financial and military aid to reward him for opposing al-Qaeda. They chatted amiably about, among other things, helping refurbish Libya's C-130s, and expressed amazement at being in the country supping with Khadafy. The State Department cable indicated that Sen. McCain talked with Khadafy father and son about "the many ways in which the United States and Libya can work together as partners."

Two years later he and Graham were making the rounds of TV talk shows demanding war against Khadafy for being, shock!, a dictator. That coincided with President Barack Obama claiming to be intervening for humanitarian purposes: Benghazi, he warned, "could suffer a massacre that would have reverberated across the region and stained the conscience of the world." However, he, like officials around the globe, usually spout humanitarian slogans to camouflage their real agendas.

Obama's claim was fraudulent, a blatant lie. The administration cited a Khadafy speech threatening death and worse to those resisting his forces, but his bloody rhetoric was directed at enemy combatants, those armed and resisting government forces, not civilians. In fact, he promised amnesty for insurgents who abandoned their weapons. Nor had Khadafy massacred any civilians, even on retaking cities from the opposition. He was a garden-variety dictator with little respect for life and dignity, but in that he differed not at all from a score of regimes allied with and armed by the US and European governments.

While claiming to care about Libya's people, America and European embarrassingly secondary player which ran out of munitions and had to beg Washington for resupply – actually prolonged combat in a low-tech civil war, increasing casualties. Rather than risking any of their own people, the "great" powers did just enough to ensure that Khadafy would lose, irrespective of the cost to the Libyan people.

Even worse was leaving the country in chaos. Obama piously declared: "We had a unique ability to stop the violence." What came next was worse than the original war. The continuing conflict also diverted GNA-affiliated militias from warring against ISIS and other violent extremists. So far nine additional years of murder and mayhem have resulted, while most of the Western leaders who orchestrated the disaster have retired in comfort if not luxury. And the conflict continues to rage. War is not a humanitarian instrument and its impact is only rarely beneficial to those suffering through it. Alas, its practitioners, especially those directing the world's sole superpower, rarely pay a price for loosing the dogs of war upon other nations.

Moreover, ill-considered interventions set dangerous and harmful precedents that can be reversed only with great difficulty. China and Russia are malign international actors. Nevertheless, in 2011 they went along with a U.S.-sponsored resolution authorizing "all necessary measures to prevent the killing of civilians." After the allies supported the insurgency by targeting Khadafy's force, Beijing and Moscow realized that they had been swindled. They indicated that never again would they trust America and approve a similar measure.

Perhaps the worst impact was on states that might negotiate with America. Khadafy's fate was filmed. Anyone can view his ragged and bloodied visage shortly before his torturous death on YouTube. No doubt the leaders of North Korea have seen what happened to someone who dealt with Washington and offered up his missiles and nukes. The West played him and took him out at its earliest opportunity when he was vulnerable. Why would Kim Jong-un ever trust Washington? The likelihood of the North yielding its regime-protecting deterrent was never good. After Libya it is inconceivable.

All too often ill-considered US intervention empowers other and sometimes hostile powers. The most important beneficiaries of America's invasion of Iraq were al-Qaeda/ISIS and Iran. Americans, and many more Iraqis and Syrians, died in the ensuing conflict. Now Washington is

demanding that the weak Iraqi government put the demons freed by America's action back into the geopolitical Pandora's Box.

Libya's conflict has had a similar result. Other than France and Italy, none of the states meddling in Libya's conflict come close to representing America's interests and values. The latest nations to intervene, Russia and Turkey, are most likely to act against Washington's policies. Whereas Khadafy had established a working relationship with the US government and numerous capitals across Europe, today America faces only chaos. And a triumphant unity government influenced by either Moscow or Ankara is unlikely to be particularly friendly.

Why are so many countries devoting so much effort to shaping Libya's future? The Europeans fear more economic migrants heading to their continent. Turkey hopes to control Libya's oil, though in today's world the value of such deposits is problematic. Moscow desires influence and perhaps a military base. However, continued turmoil, which seems inevitable so long as a half dozen countries intervene and block one another, is unlikely to benefit anyone.

The conflict's final lesson is that even the guilty can be counted on to express pieties to cover their crimes. Washington sought to discourage Ankara from acting. State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus declared: "external military intervention threatens prospects for resolving the conflict." This was a bit rich coming from someone representing the US, which along with France and Italy, also currently involved, exacerbated, prolonged, and expanded the initial conflict. Of course, Washington long has believed that it possesses a monopoly on the right and duty to bomb, invade, and occupy other nations at will.

Similarly, the Arab League denounced "foreign interference" which could "further aggravate the situation in Libya and threaten the security and stability of neighboring countries and the entire region." Among the organization's members: Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE, all backing one side or the other in Libya's destabilizing civil war. So far none has apologized for its involvement.

Indeed, Egypt's President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi announced: "We will not allow anyone to control Libya. It is a matter of Egyptian national security." When he last met the president, in December, the White House reported that they "rejected foreign exploitation and agreed that parties must take urgent steps to resolve the conflict before Libyans lose control to foreign actors." Alas, that happened precisely nine years ago. When America and Europe decided to initiate regime change.

Even the man with ultimate responsibility for the Libyan disaster, President Obama, eventually realized that the result was a "shit show." However, he learned he wrong lesson. He still defended intervening but declared in 2014: "[W]e [and] our European partners underestimated the need to come in full force if you're going to do this. Then it's the day after Qaddafi is gone, when everybody is feeling good and everybody is holding up posters saying, 'Thank you, America.' At that moment, there has to be a much more aggressive effort to rebuild societies that didn't have any civic traditions."

Actually, he meant *building*, not rebuilding, societies without civic traditions that the West takes for granted. And he presumed Libyans who had just won their civil war would have welcomed the West coming "in full force" and imposing its vision for Libya's future. Washington spent years attempting the same without much better success in Iraq. And three very different administrations have so far devoted almost 19 years to nation-building in Afghanistan without

establishing a peaceful, stable, liberal democracy. The mistake in Libya was intervening, not intervening more heavily and longer.

Desperately needed is a regional conference on Libya's future, involving all the combatants. The most realistic outcome is to recognize separate states. Libya, yet another artifact of European colonial line-drawing, long melded three (two important, one less so) very different regions and sets of tribes. Cyrenaica, hosting Benghazi, in the east, long was hostile to Khadafy and spawned previous revolts against his rule.

So divided were Libyans that even three years after Khadafy's death a British training program for recruits in the army of the nominal national government at the time had to be closed.

London's plan to assist Libya collapsed "after a series of criminal charges and convictions for sex offenses," reported the *Guardian*. "But the strategy has had the makings of a disaster since the beginning. It is partly because of infighting among the trainees – fueled by ideological, political and tribal differences – over events back in Libya." There no longer is any reason to maintain the fiction that these peoples should be forced to live together.

Libya is a continuing tragedy. Thousands of Libyans have died. Tens of thousands have been injured or driven from their homes. Like Humpty Dumpty, the country is increasingly unlikely to emerge whole. And whatever results is likely to be influenced if not controlled from afar. GNA's interior minister, Fathi Bashagha, observed: "Every day we are burying young people who should be helping us build Libya." Sadly, graves will continue to be filled.

Libya is the malodorous gift that keeps on giving. Yet there is little evidence that American policymakers have learned anything from the ongoing disaster. Which means more innocent people around the world are likely to die in future bungled attempts by Washington to violently transform other nations.

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