



Biden Needs To Repudiate Obama's Policy Legacy: The Case of Libya

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If Joe Biden wants to produce a constructive record in foreign policy, he needs to repudiate much of the Obama-Biden administration's foreign policy legacy. In particular, he must demonstrate that the United States is out of the forcible regime-change business. Washington's so-called humanitarian military interventions and regime-change wars have done little except create havoc. From Bosnia and Kosovo to Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, Washington's ministrations have caused enormous human suffering.

Libya is a prominent example. The country's longtime dictator, Muammar Qaddafi, was hardly a model of good governance; corruption and repression were indelible characteristics of his rule. Nevertheless, Qaddafi was able to maintain a modicum of stability and order, and Libya was a modernizing society with increased signs of prosperity. However, like many of the colonies that the European powers had slapped together, Libya was a fragile entity with some major societal and political divisions. Rival tribes in the western and eastern portions of the country feuded frequently, and rebellions against Qaddafi's western-based regime had flared on several occasions.

When another of those periodic rebellions erupted in early 2011, Barack Obama's administration (along with several European members of NATO) decided to aid the eastern rebels in their insurgency. Although masked as a purely humanitarian effort to protect civilians, the resulting military intervention quickly became a flagrant regime-change war, and it succeeded in the short-term, as the insurgents overthrew and killed Qaddafi. U.S. officials took great satisfaction in NATO's achievement, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton making the [flippant observation](#): "We came, we saw, he died."

Obama was more dignified in his comments, but his assessment of the regime-change campaign was equally positive, and he exuded optimism about Libya's future. On the eve of the rebel triumph, the president [stated](#) that "Tripoli is slipping from the grasp of a tyrant. The people of Libya are showing that the universal pursuit of dignity and freedom is far stronger than the iron fist of a dictator." Following Qaddafi's death, Obama [asserted](#) that "the dark shadow of tyranny has been lifted" from Libya.

The actual aftermath was [horrifyingly different](#). Libya descended into bloody chaos, as numerous militias – some with decidedly Islamist orientations – vied for power. The Obama

administration itself received a rude awakening in September 2012 when one of those militias attacked the US consulate in Benghazi, [killing](#) Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans. Hundreds of thousands of Libyans became refugees, with many of them desperately trying to reach sanctuary in Europe by braving the waters of the Mediterranean in overcrowded, leaky boats and [perishing](#) in the attempt. Instead of a stable, albeit repressive, country, Libya had become Somalia on the Mediterranean. The breakdown of social order is now so extensive, that [slave markets](#) featuring captured black African migrants have made a reappearance.

Over the years, the fighting has coalesced into a struggle for power between two rival regimes, the Government of National Accord (GNA), recognized by the United Nations and most countries, including the United States, and the Libyan National Army (LNA), headed by one-time CIA asset, "Field Marshal" Khalifa Haftar. Libya also is increasingly the geopolitical plaything of outside powers, with Egypt, Russia, and other countries backing Haftar, while Turkey provides ever-escalating support for the GNA.

In short, the Obama administration created a colossal political mess and humanitarian tragedy in Libya. In fairness, Joe Biden opposed launching the military intervention. In their memoirs, Obama's secretary of defense, Robert M. Gates, and his deputy national security adviser, Ben Rhodes, both confirm that point. Rhodes [recalls](#) that at a key meeting of the president and his foreign policy team, "Biden said that intervention was, essentially, madness – why should we get involved in another war in a Muslim-majority country?" The new president should firmly re-commit to practicing such wise caution when he takes office.

The Trump administration generally has kept US Libya policy on autopilot. Fortunately, the president at least has not taken the bait from the latest contingent of well-meaning meddlers and deepened US involvement. Typical of such advice that Trump received (and which Biden will certainly receive) were [the comments](#) of *Washington Post* columnist Josh Rogin. "Whatever you think of President Barack Obama's decision to militarily intervene in Libya in 2011, the fact is that the United States has a responsibility in making sure that country has the best possible chance of achieving stability and democracy, and remains our partner in fighting terrorism. But the Trump administration is missing in action."

It is imperative that Biden spurn such views. The last thing America needs is to re-engage in the Libya quagmire. US officials already have inflicted far too much suffering on that poor country. The best that Washington can do now is not make matters even worse, and urge other countries, especially NATO ally Turkey, to exercise similar restraint. Finally, it is important that Biden explicitly acknowledge the extent of the harm that the Obama-Biden administration inflicted, and make it clear that there will be no repetition of such folly in Libya or anywhere else.

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