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Avoiding the Planning Fallacy in Libya

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[Christopher A. Preble](#)^[2]



I posted a long commentary on the events unfolding in Libya [earlier today at Cato](#)^[3], but I left aside a few additional points that deserve to be considered on their own. Specifically, if Muammar Qaddafi's 42-year old regime collapses, as seems likely, what is likely to come after? And what should the United States be prepared to do to shape the post-Qaddafi environment?

If Libya avoids a protracted political crisis like the one that has defined Iraq and other post-autocratic states, it will be the exception. When an existing political and social order is overturned, whether from the people below or from foreigners beyond, former regime supporters are likely to resist. Some may entertain notions of recovering the privileged place that they had and lost; others will act out of a sense of desperation and self-preservation, merely to avoid being slaughtered, or driven from their homes and businesses, by a new regime intent on revenge. In many cases, this resistance can become violent. In the worst cases, it amounts to

civil war. That is essentially what happened in Iraq. The heaviest fighting, the largest loss of life for U.S. servicemen and women and the greatest threats to innocent Iraq civilians, occurred in Iraq long after U.S. forces pulled down Saddam's statue in Firdaus Square.

Many people reacted with shock and surprise when this occurred. War boosters like Bill Kristol, who had casually dismissed the suggestion that Sunni-Shia tension existed in Iraq [4], later argued that these unfortunate incidents, which had the effect of snatching a painful, costly occupation from the jaws of an apparent quick and easy victory, was caused by a combination of arrogance and incompetence within the Bush administration. The dominant presumption was that better planning, a larger invasion force and a more disciplined and intrusive post-war presence would have prevented much of the violence and chaos that has defined post-Saddam Iraq.

A paper that I co-authored a few years ago with Ben Friedman and Harvey Sapolsky [5] challenged this point of view. The problem with believing that better "planning could have save Iraq," we explained, was:

that it implies that proper organizational charts and meetings can stabilize broken countries and make order where there is none. This confuses a process with a policy, a bureaucratic mechanism with power. Planning solves engineering problems. Upgrading electrical grids, extending modern sewerage, and rebuilding schools and hospitals—these things are easily planned. The management of foreign societies is another matter altogether.

While we argued that there was nothing inevitable about the chaos that consumed Iraq, we suggested that even the wisest U.S. general or senior American diplomat "armed with the best plans, would have struggled to implant a liberal order in which the Iraqi people would easily cooperate with one another in a democratic state."

Every country is unique, of course, and the situation in Libya is likely to play out differently than the one in Iraq. But some of the same individuals who were banging the drums for war (both wars, actually) don't want to take the chance. Even as they claim credit for midwifing the birth of a new Libya, they want foreign troops [6] to nursemaid the new nation to at least a healthy childhood. Others, presumably, will only be satisfied with a long-term foreign presence in Libya (just as the clamor for one in Iraq and Afghanistan), to ensure that the child grows into a responsible adult. Such calls ignore the fact that the very presence of such troops will infantilize the new nation, a point which a few of the more honest nation-building proponents freely admit. (See, for example, the discussion of James Fearon and David Laitin's "neotrusteeship" idea here [7].)

So, a few key questions remain: will U.S. troops be included in a multinational stabilization force? Having failed to stop the United States from waging war in Libya, will the opponents succeed in preventing U.S. ground troops from being deployed there? Does the pottery barn principle [8] (if you break it, you own it) trump U.S. national interests?

It is too soon to know the answers to any of these questions, but recent experience suggests that Americans will be both reluctant to invest heavily in post-conflict reconstruction but also reluctant to walk away. That isn't a particularly promising formula, and one hopes that the Libyan people get their act together quickly, put aside their differences peacefully, and obviate the need for a long-term foreign-military presence, or perhaps for any foreign presence at all.

Either way, just as the United States would have been justified in staying out of the early stages

of the conflict, so too can we politely decline to become involved at this latter stage. If Libya's neighbors wish to help the new nation get on its feet, that is their right. And if the United Nations can assemble an international force to serve a similar end, more power to it. But the U.S. military's plate is already too full, and no U.S. official should be clamoring to add another nation-building mission to their to-do list.

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